

The Reflection in the Mirror

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Well, homme, you sure done it now. Maybe, just maybe Rogue would have come around, and not made you wade through all that garbage you were turning your soul inside out to forget. But now...oh, hell. Why would she want to? Homme, you be a mess.

Remy turned away from the mirror he couldn't see. He wasn't a vain man, exactly, but he'd had a supreme confidence in himself that was in part based on the admiring looks he was used to getting. From women who saw the excitement and danger hidden not too far below the surface. From men who envied his smooth charm. The often taken long walk from the doctor's office home showed him exactly what his life would now be like. People who had formerly respected his silence, but would usually nod to him did their best not to stare. Mothers pulled children out of his way. A pretty girl looked, shivered and drew back. An old man gazed at him with pity. And he didn't even have the comfort of not knowing it. Between his spatial awareness and his empathy, being blind almost didn't matter.

He tried to pull himself out of this unwelcome vulnerability to what others thought about him. **Beast got t'rough looking diff'rent and didn't lose his cool. Fact is, you admired dat. Yeah, I jus' be like Henri.** He tried to feel his way into Henry's perpetual good humor. **Just another costume, neh?** It chafed in places, and rubbed him raw in others as he tried to be pleasant to someone he could feel shrinking away from him. He realized Henry's way was never going to work for him as he made his way back to his cabin. He stopped in the

entryway and turned to face the mirror he knew was there. Slowly he raised his hand and clumsily touched the smooth, cool surface.

Guess it work for Henri because he got not'ing to hide. Me, I got t'ings buried dat make 'Pocalypse look at me like I was dirt.

May as well be dirt. Rogue ain't never gonna be come back. Leas' not to me. Yeah, dere was a chance I could 'a talked her 'round sooner or later. 'Til Seattle, she ...liked...me. Never could get more outta her dan dat. She respond to me partly 'cause of how I looked. Can' fault dat.

Rogue don' be dat shallow. She won' care 'bout how I look now. Optimistic voices that ran through his head, and wouldn't be silenced. His shattered face twisted into a new pattern of scars. **Yeah. Guess dat be true. 'Cept Rogue don' like what was inside before de outside got so messed up. And de inside is what got to count now.** Rogue couldn't face up to what, no, who he was. He knew what she'd seen in his head that day. Some half-unconscious mental misdirection had kept her away from the worst, but what she'd gotten had sent her running as far away from him as she could get. **What you got to tempt her wit' now, homme?** A bitter question, and his heart redoubled it's lonely ache at the answer that didn't have to be heard aloud.

Remy had nowhere to go, and nowhere he wanted to be. He'd left the X-Men. He saw Rogue around every corner, felt her imprint on every room he was in, and he couldn't deal with it. His mind seemed to be in a permanent replay of that moment in Seattle, when he'd stretched out his hand to her, and dared to put his future on the line. Rogue had turned away. Maybe someone else could have considered it a temporary setback. But not an empath. His heart had been wide open to Rogue. In a style he'd never used before, he'd actually been begging her to see past what he was, to see what he was trying to be, for her. Begging for her to give him the most precious gifts he knew; trust, understanding, someone to believe in him. Rogue wouldn't or couldn't. He knew she ran when things got tough, but he'd needed her to try. Instead, she'd left again. **Didn' look like she even hesitated, mon ami.** He couldn't lie to himself. Rogue had wanted nothing to do with him, or his ugly past. He'd begun to feel like nothing more than a reflection in a mirror. He remembered his favorite children's story, "The Velveteen Rabbit", and how the little rabbit had ached to be real, and loved. If nobody loved you, did that mean you could never be real? Because heaven knew he didn't feel any more solid than the reflection he couldn't see.

After that, Remy knew he couldn't stay in the mansion any longer. He'd thought long and hard about leaving the team, for they'd become like family to the heartlonely Gambit. But his "family" was giving him the silent treatment. Their not talking to him was bad enough. Their silent looks of accusation were killing him. Like he'd deliberately revealed his past to Rogue, just to drive her away from what was her family too. Her family first. He wasn't imagining it, he could feel it. So, to save what was left of his sanity, he'd known he'd have to go.

Noble wasn't something Remy did well, but for Rogue, and in an effort to **make** them understand, he'd tried. He'd wanted to find Rogue and talk to her before he left, to say he was trying to accept her decision, and tell herâ€|nothing she wanted to hear. Remy sighed, and

realized the best he was capable of where Rogue was concerned was to leave her be.

Remy had made it a point to never explain the why's of his life, but he'd wanted to try this time. He'd tried to find a way to explain to Cyclops that his heart couldn't believe in dreams anymore. He'd wanted to belong to Rogue; that had been his dream from the moment he saw her, standing there so defiant and vulnerable. It was the only one he could ever remember allowing himself to have, and it was shattered beyond his ability to comprehend. Haunted as he was, he couldn't find the ability or the desire to follow someone else's. But Rogue was gone, and Cyclops wouldn't see past the fact that in his opinion, Gambit's leaving was quitting, pure and simple. Scott's unspoken condemnation piled onto Gambit's already heavy load of self-hatred, and the weight bent shoulders that pride had never allowed to show shame. Sadness dulled the shine that Gambit's personality had sparkled with. Despair muted his easy way with words, and left him with stumbled sentences that would have been better off as silence.

Remy had never denied his empathy to himself. To him it was just another weapon in his arsenal, but his unhappiness had dissolved his usual control of his gift, and the emotional buffeting he was taking from his teammates was having miserable consequences. He'd known Scott didn't think much of him. Usually, the feeling was returned in a teasing kind of way. But being a part of the X-Men had meant something to him, whether the others had understood that or not. It meant he could redeem his soul bit by bit. He could escape his past, and start over with a new family. And he'd thought they'd begun to believe in him. He'd thought they understood that this time he wasn't just out for himself. From Scott's emotions at this point though, it was clear that he'd been waiting and hoping for the time Gambit would give up and go away. And Scott was glad about it. Remy tried to reach for some understanding of Scott Summers. **Maybe Scott jus' see what still below de surface, and don' believe I can be better dan I used to. Can' blame de guy for dat.** But his heart called him a liar.

Remy tried to say goodbye to the others. Logan growled and stalked away before he got a word out. Storm was off on a mission, and couldn't be reached. Jean looked at him like she'd like to run his mind through a cuisenart to find what Rogue has seen that made her leave her adoptive family. Bobby sneered. "Bout time you figured out you don't belong here."

The only person he'd managed to get a semi-civilized response from was Beast. But even with Henry, there was a reserve to his manner. **Henry, he don' wan' to know why I be leaving. He don' wan' to feel he got to help. He jus' wan' t'ings to get back to what passes for normal 'roun here.**

Gambit's control was fracturing. He needed someone to understand, but didn't know how to reach out to anyone, or make them believe him. His smooth talk and easy patter weren't much good when he needed someone to really understand. Stormy might have. But Storm wasn't there when Remy finally figured out that if he stayed, his presence and Rogue's absence would cause damage to the team that would never be fixable. If he stayed, well...he'd probably be dead in a year.

Remy couldn't recognize himself anymore. Not so much the outside, but

the far greater changes inside. His time with the X-Men had shown him that his automatic defenses against letting people get too close weren't always needed. He felt betrayed when he realized how their reactions to his leaving contradicted what they preached.

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These days, when he needed his armor most, when he needed to not care what people thought of him, it felt like what was once a reflex was beyond his grasp. Every thought of everyone around him was like looking into a mirror, only it wasn't just a reflection they gave back. Their shock, disgust, fear, and horror passed into his soul. His battered heart was shown again and again that the ugliness inside was finally reflected on the outside.

Homme, you sure screwed your life up. Here you be, needing to reach out to someone, and just now realizing you ain't got no one. He studied the Rogue sized hole in himself. **Ain't nobody gonna fit it.** He ran his scarred and twisted fingers over his face. **Hell, homme...ain't nobody gonna want it.**

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He'd wandered for a long while after he left the X-Men. He'd stopped briefly in New Orleans, but home didn't feel like home anymore. He moved to New York, and the crowds he used to fit into like a second skin, but the splintered emotions, and broken heart in him cried for solitude. He passed over the northwest. Finally he found a refuge of sorts in Canada. Here was solitude. Deep in the woods, no one's emotions all but assaulted him when he walked by. He could be as alone as he needed or wanted to be. He bought a small cabin about four miles out of a small town that he visited only when imminent starvation made him. Remy wasn't intentionally brooding, but not being around others made him more and more aware of how alone he was, and he avoided thinking about the past when he could. The one exception was thoughts of Rogue. He couldn't remove her image from inside him with two quarts of morphine and a scalpel.

It was the not thinking that started it. Remy couldn't stop being aware of everything in his vicinity. What he could do was not pay attention to the warning his ability was giving him. He was on his monthly trip to town, and wrapped up in thoughts of Rogue too deep to be shaken out of lightly.

Trying to figure a way to be someone Rogue wanted to know again, he ignored the ball that rolled down the sidewalk. Saw it when he tripped over it, of course. Saw it real up close and personal when he fell off the curb into the street and the ball skipped past his nose. **Dieu.** His nose. **Ouch. Homme, t'ink you gonna have to have de local doc take a look at dat. Don' t'ink its s'posed to bend dat way.** Pounding footsteps warned him of an approach.

"Sorry mister. Gotta catch my ball. Be back inna minute." He watched the child dash after the ball. The kid had red hair, which started him back on thoughts of Rogue. Remy rolled to his feet without his usual grace. He touched his nose gingerly. **Damn.** He sighed. **Guess dis Cajun boy gonna be spendin' more time in town dan he wanted.**

He heard the raspy squeal of sliding tires, heard the screech of

metal twisting around metal, heard the soft thud of flesh meeting metal, and then the screams. It was the screams that jarred him into movement. Seems he still needed to feel like he made a difference after all.

He ran to where a car had wrapped itself around a lamppost in an effort to avoid the child chasing his ball. It had failed. He saw the child crumpled against the curb, but a couple of people nearby were doing what could be done to help him. He looked at the car, and time slowed down as he went into what he'd always thought of as "battle mode".

Driver; not moving; no passenger. Car wrapped around the pole right behind the driver side door. **Not gonna get him out dat way, homme.** Time slowed further for the Cajun as he assessed possibles and probables. He tried the passenger side door. It moved, but wouldn't open. **Gonna have to blow de door.** He sent a low charge into the edge of the door, trying to make the jamb release without exploding the entire door, and injuring the driver further.

That's when everything blew up in his face. Literally. Remy kept thinking he should have seen the leaking gas. He'd been subconsciously counting on the smell to warn him, but his nose wasn't in any shape to help. The charge he'd sent into the door caused the door to release, all right, but also sparked the gas pooling around his feet.

If you looked at it from the doc's point of view, he'd been incredibly lucky. EMS personnel were pulling onto the scene when he pulled his spectacular imitation of the Torch. Somebody got to him in seconds with a blanket they used to smother the flames. He'd been wearing his usual leather duster, and his boots, and so hardly had any burns where he was protected by his coat, but his face and hands, well, like the doc said, at least he still had partial use of the left hand. His one noticeable mutant feature, his eyes, were both more and less noticeable. The scarring was the more so, the fact that he no longer had the red-on-black eyes at all was the less so. In effect, however, useless. His right hand had been burned clear to the bone, and made a great paperweight these days.

An alpha class mutant who may as well be Homo sapien. **Can still charge de cardsâ€|jus' gonna get stuck wit 'em cause I can' t'row dem no more.** The irony of it struck a note of black humor. **Hell, homme, what one more explosion gonna do to me, eh?** A twist of the lips that would once have been a sardonic grin.

Remy's legendary agility was gone. His catlike walk was still there, but was shadowed by the ruin of his face and the awkward way his arms were held. Since getting out of the hospital, he kept his hands hidden in his pockets whenever possible. He'd thrown out his fingerless gloves and bought a pair of leather driving gloves. Wearing them became second nature. The sunglasses weren't a big adjustment. He'd worn them most all the time anyway.

Remy knew he'd have to think about what he was going to do next. The accident had occurred over a year ago. The hospital and plastic surgeons had done what they could, but they couldn't make him what he was. The first month he couldn't remember anything but pain. He'd wake screaming, and wouldn't be able to stop. Remy knew about pain. He'd been injured before, but the loss of control regarding his

empathy that he'd first started to experience just before he'd left the X-Men had now extended to other areas. He couldn't shut the pain away, or use it as a spur to keep going. It just was, and it seemed never ending.

Remy fell backwards onto the sofa in the living room, awkwardly holding his hands against his chest. **T'ink dat second mont' be worse dan de first in some ways.** The first month's constant pain had helped suppress his empathy to some degree. After that, he'd tried, with only partial success, to relearn control of his gifts. He'd woken up one morning whimpering like a frightened child after a nightmare. An unspoken cry for Rogue was echoing through him, reverberating throughout his soul like footsteps through an empty room. He wanted Rogue.

Something within him broke then. Remy hadn't cried in public since he was two. Now, the tears were absent from his useless eyes, but the sobs of a grown man who simply couldn't take anymore pain had the nurses who'd come running to his door shedding them for him. The overwhelming sobbing brought on by too much mental and physical torment had broken free from his frayed control and wouldn't stop for three weeks. The docs had a field day trying new anti-depressant medications on him. Problem is, when breathing in and out reminds you that you don't have a reason to breathe in and out anymore, it's real hard to feel happy. **Don' feel bad, homme, weren't the first time you cried over her. Prob'ly won' be de last, neither.**

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Back at the mansion, Jean was once again staring into space. Finally, after watching her stare at the walls for a week, Scott gave in and asked what was wrong.

"I think we made a mistake," Jean said.

"About what?" asked Scott, trying to figure where his wife's mind had been wandering to come up with that particular statement.

"Remy."

Suddenly, he didn't want to know what his wife had been thinking. "I see. Just what has Rogue said to you since she got back?"

"Scott, she just got back a two days ago, and has been either in her room, or on the roof for forty hours of it. I haven't had a chance to say anything to her other than welcome home, and you know it."

"Okay. But something has been bugging you for the last week. I'd assumed you had a good reason to be distracted, but if it's just Gambit, I'd say it's your business."

Jean put her hand on Scott's arm as he started to turn away.

"No Scott, I mean it. I think we were wrong."

Scott sighed, and reached for his patience. There was precious little left where Gambit was concerned. "And just how, pray tell, were we wrong? Did we forget to send him a Christmas card? Gee, I'm sorry

Gambit. Guess Santa couldn't find a pit deep enough to bury you in. Wish you were here, I'd turn you over to Logan, and he'd do it personally."

Jean looked at him, and her disappointment in him showed in her mental withdrawal.

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Rogue sat on the roof, looking at the sunset. Her life didn't seem to be making much sense to her lately, and she needed to find a direction, a goal to head toward.

She'd heard that Remy had left the X-Men several months ago, and she couldn't understand what she was feeling. Relieved that she wouldn't have to deal with him, certainly. But what else? Did she still like him? She'd seen the look in his eyes when she turned away from him in Seattle. Those enigmatic eyes of his that were usually faintly calculating and mostly flirtatious had personified the word pain. And she'd caused it. Both then and right now, Rogue didn't like herself very much for that.

She tried to justify what she'd done to Remy by remembering what she'd seen in that murky maze he called his mind. But for every act of thoughtlessness, there was a kindness that was just as unthinking. For every crime committed, no matter how revolting or terrible, she'd also sensed an infinite hoard of remorse and misery.

That dichotomy was the heart of her problem. She was scared of Gambit. She'd seen the evil he'd done, and seen the lack of caring with which he'd accomplished it. Being sorry for it didn't seem to matter much, after that. She'd seen him turn on the charm when he wanted something, and turn it off when he had it. **Was Ah just somethin' he wanted?** she wondered.

That dog won't hunt, she was forced to concede. **Remy done coulda had me most anytime, but he only pushed 'til he knew Ah'da pushed back if'n he'd gone any further.**

She remembered the way Remy had gone out of his way to make sure Rogue knew he cared about her, their first date, even that dadblamed kiss. Rogue finally acknowledged that Remy really honestly and truly loved her.

But did Rogue love Remy? Danged if'n she knew. **What does love feel like from the inside out?** Rogue had learned early on that people who are lonely build walls around their hearts, instead of bridges. She also knew that Remy had to be one of the loneliest people she'd ever met, not that any of the other X-Men would agree with her. Where did Remy get the courage to reach out to her? What made Remy decide that she was the one he wanted? Her looks? With that danged skunk striped hair, not hardly. The southern belle act? Might have started the attraction, but Remy knew she weren't no sweet, shy Miss Muffett.

Maybe there ain't no reason. Maybe there's some truth to the rumor that ever'body has a soul mate. Could I be Remy's other half, without him bein' mine? That don't rightly seem fair.

Confusion settled in a heavy cloud around Rogue. She built a picture

of Gambit in her mind. As she looked at it, she felt like smacking herself once for being stupid, and twice for being really stupid. It wasn't **_Remy_* she was scared of; it was Gambit! And from the first moment they'd met, when Storm had introduced him to the team as her friend, Gambit, he'd walked straight over to where she sat, and said "No, chere, to you I always be Remy."

Remy had done gone and told her who he was, time and time again, and still she didn't see it. His refusal to discuss his past went hand in hand with his identity. To the others, he was the mysterious Cajun Gambit, whose secrets were his to keep, as long as they didn't cause the team problems. To Rogue, those secrets belonged to someone else, not her Remy. **It weren't like Remy was some Mafia boss, or nothin', who didn't want his girl involved in his business, her Remy just weren't that person no more.**

**I gotta go tell him. ** That conclusion reached, Rogue headed for Jean.

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"Jean? Where'd Remy go when he left?" Rogue looked somewhere past Jean's left shoulder as she asked. "I gotta tell him somthin'."
"

Jean looked at Rogue, taking in the troubled eyes, and tension brackets around her mouth. "I don't know, Rogue."

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The challenges of day to day living had become marginally interesting to Remy. He'd never really thought about how handicapped people had managed on a minute to minute basis. He'd always regarded them with a certain amount of "There but for the grace of God go I" pity. He helped where he saw a problem, and promptly went on with his life.

That was no longer a viable option for the Cajun. Every facet of his life had changed, and in no way did he think it was for the better. **Dat which don' kill me, gonna make me stronger, neh?** He thought with a small burst of annoyed amusement.

His difficulties never seemed to have a starting or stopping point. He had troubles from the minute he tried to roll out of bed, to the obstacles he faced tilting into bed, and lord help him if he tried to turn over once he was there.

Remy was blind, had partial use of only one arm, a voice gone from whisky smooth to moonshine rough from smoke, and a face that made people look away rather than offer to help. Not that he wanted help. Remy refused to acknowledge that he wasn't doing just fine on his own.

He regarded as minor such problems as getting dressed with only one hand, learning how to label cans in the pantry so he wasn't eating "whatchacallit" every night, and learning to buy all his clothes in one color. Although, how he knew for sure they were all one color was anyone's guess.

The problem he was having the most difficulty with was the dreaming.

Some were nightmares, some were not, but every last one involved the X-Men.

He'd see Storm aloft in the wind, hurling thunderbolts, or Henry, working in the lab, with the clock on his desk blinking 2 A.M. He'd see Jean, eyes closed, leaning against Scott as he watched the evening news. Or Bobby, getting his butt kicked from one end of an alley to another by Riptide.

Remy knew he'd in some way let himself down when he left the team. He wanted to tell himself that he should have found a way to stick it out. It never once occurred to him that his slipping control over his empathy was subjecting him to emotional abuse. Some unconscious habit made sure he knew he deserved it.

As months slipped by, and the dreams refused to fade, Gambit began to realize it was time for a change.

Without his noticing, he'd started making peace with himself. The duel between Gambit and Remy had been fought on a silent battlefield, and both had died. A stronger person slowly emerged, and looked ahead to the future.

T'ink it's time maybe I go back. The thought crossed his mind, and then had to do it again. **What de hell I be t'inkin?** He threw out that bit of nonsense, and continued on.

But life refused to leave the Cajun alone.

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One cloudy day, he was sitting on the cabin's back porch. He'd just finished his proscribed therapy, and as usual, the intense pain the exercises cost him had left him sweaty, hurting, and extremely tired.

He could smell the rain in the air, and knew it was only a matter of time till he'd have to go back in. He'd always hated the rain. It interfered with his spatial perception to the point of giving him a rather intense headache. To a thief, the rain should be a friend; masking movement and sound, but Remy hated it nonetheless.

Last night, he'd dreamed again. This time it was Ororo, as he'd first met her. A small child of no more than ten.

Unable to shake off the lingering remnants of his dreams, he wanted to be outside, among the elements that 'Ro called her friends. He needed the reminder that he hadn't always been alone. **Tch. You getting sorry for yourself, homme. T'ink you got enough goin' on, don' need to add to de pot.**

Remy went back into his kitchen, and fished a mug out of the cupboard, making a cup of "only-a-Cajun-could-drink-this-mud" instant coffee in the microwave. He opened the fridge and mentally reviewed the contents, but he was too tired to cook, and there wasn't anything there immediately edible. **Wasn't really hungry anyways,** he told himself.

As exhaustion crept up on him despite the valiant effort of the sludge in his mug, the vitality that, despite everything, still

marked his movements dimmed. Remy didn't bother to hide it, but only because there was no one else around. Growing up the way he had, he'd learned that vulnerability was always noted, and would always be used against him at some point. Even now, surrounded by no one but the birds and squirrels, those lessons might be put aside, but were never forgotten.

He dumped the rest of the coffee down the sink, rinsed the mug and dropped it in the dishwasher. Despite, or perhaps because of, his habits of sleeping till noon, smoking like a chimney, and dressing like a scruffy backwoods boy, his teammates had never realized that Remy was something of a neat-freak. As a master thief, his life had often depended on being able to lay his hands on exactly the right thing at the right time. That meant you had to know exactly where things were, and you left them the same way every time. **Damn good asset, when you can' see no more, too** he decided.

He drifted back to the porch, sitting on the lowest step, and leaning against the side rails.

Eventually, thunder rumbled, and as he rose to go inside, the dark clouds that had quickly scudded overhead opened up. In less time than it took Remy to utter a particularly creative cussword, he was drenched.

Remy was glad 'Ro wasn't here right now. Ororo gloried in all aspects of nature. To Ororo, nature was showing off just for her when seasons changed, bringing snow or rain.

Remy hadn't any desire to hurt her feelings, so while he could never pretend to enjoy the rain, he had somehow failed to mention just how much pain it brought him. It had been worth it to see the delight in her eyes when the elements came up with some new way to entertain her.

Remy was bone-tired, and already soaked. If he was going to be thinking about Ororo, seemed like the best place to do it was the rain. He noticed the headache was already present, so he simply folded. Dropping into an Indian seat on the porch, he remembered Ororo.

Meeting up wit' her was prob'l'y de best t'ing dat ever happen to me. Remy knew what would have happened to him eventually, living in his shadowed world. He'd had no cornerstones in his life. No reason to believe in anything, no reason to try to be anything.

Thrown out of New Orleans, and severed of all adoptive family ties was a severe blow. But they couldn't take his thieving skills, which was how he'd made his living afterwards. He'd quickly become a master thief, untouchable. There was no more challenge to be found in the pinch.

With nothing more to look forward to, Remy's boredom would soon have turned self-destructive. He would have wound up an adrenaline junkie, living for the rush he got by cheating death. Death would have won in the end, and just what would that have meant? To anyone else, not a damn thing. To Remy, not a damn thing. Looking back on those days, Remy gave an inward shudder.

That was when Sinister made his appearance. To a young, arrogant

Remy, Sinister was just another possible employer. To Sinister, Remy was perhaps his greatest opportunity. One he had absolutely no intention of ever letting go.

With a mental trick he had long ago perfected to save what was left of his sanity, Remy deflected his thought process away from that black hole of memories.

Even thinking about thinking about Sinister was more than enough to dispel some of the tiredness, but the dreams had been keeping Remy from getting much sleep. He knew sleeping four out of twenty-four hours for the past few days was going to knock him flat in an hour or two. He indulged in a jaw-popping yawn, and gave an awkward stretch, hard enough to make several muscles protest.

'Ro was the first truly bright spot in his life. Even as a child in New Orleans, Remy had known he and his "family" were living on the dark side of the law. Being a particularly sensitive child, he endured with some distress the conflict between his desire for the sun, and the shadows of Papa LeBeau. As he grew older, and his mutant abilities made their appearance, he'd grown apart, alone.

Perhaps to balance the lucky gift of his prodigious thieving skills, a powerful gift of empathy was his curse. You could never lie to Remy. If he frightened you, he knew it. Blow upon blow rained upon him from his father, and later his wife, Belladonna. Physical abuse would have been so much easier to deal with. Instead, they'd tried to lie to him. They spoke the words he had always wanted to believe, but they had fear coloring their every dealing with him. And so, he learned not to trust. Ever.

Ororo had been a child when Remy had stumbled across her. Fleeing from the Shadow King, Remy had found in himself a fierce desire to protect this child. Left to himself, Remy would have avoided the Shadow King, but had he been caught, perhaps it would have been him meeting his fate. Instead, Remy had fallen in love with Ororo. As a child, she needed him in ways that helped mend a few of the ragged edges of his heart. Ororo had given him back a reason to be. Remy was 'Ro's protector, and guardian. It defined him for the first time in a better way. For 'Ro, he would step out of the shadows he'd learned to hide in. For 'Ro, he needed to be a better person.

But then came the X-Men, telling him Ororo was no longer his to protect. That she belonged to them. And with 'Ro back to being an adult, things changed. Remy again found himself without a definition. But he couldn't let go. He needed Ororo to remind himself that for a moment in time, he'd looked up at life and marveled. Remy clung to that memory like he'd clung to an old stuffed dog as Papa LeBeau dragged him off the streets of New Orleans when he was seven.

Remy hadn't been about to just turn Ororo over to a bunch of strangers, even if he knew they were telling the truth. Ororo had clung to him when these strangers had shown up, and Remy had felt safe being needed. They probably could have forced him to give up Ororo to them, but not without heavy damage, mostly to them. Cerebro had spotted him as a mutant, but his signature had been...odd. He didn't fit into their normal classification parameters, so they'd approached with a great deal of caution.

He knew that nothing they'd found had inspired any great amount of

reassurance. He was a man who had many masks, and all of them contained enough truth to be absolutely believable. What they saw that day was a hard man, made incongruous by the sight of a small child held protectively in his arms.

The X-Men had faced him, but uneasiness rippled through their minds. This man projected absolute confidence, and a subtle danger. The fact that he didn't put the child down, or place her behind him for protection spoke an entire encyclopedia about this man's belief in his abilities.

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Daydreamin' again, homme. Wake yourself up! Remy stirred, and realized that being wet was rapidly losing it's charm. Storm was a happy memory, but she was far away, and pneumonia was right around the corner. He rose, and made his way back inside.

Bed-time for 'dis boy, he thought and gave the kitchen a final going over, running hands along countertops to make sure everything was put away. He touched a finger to a small pot of herbs he'd placed on the windowsill; before but the scent was pleasant, and it had somehow made it through his hospital time. The soil was dry. **Rain water do d'ese pretties more good 'den tap,** he thought, and picked up the small container. **Guess 'Ro's lectures on her plant frien's stuck somehow,** he thought with a sleepy half smile.

Remy opened the door, and knelt down to set the pots on the edge of the porch, where they could catch some of the rain, but still have a bit of shelter. Remy knelt there for a moment, and let his thought drift.

Merde, he thought. **I'm so dopey I'm sittin' here like a bayou gator myself.** With an effort, he rose to his feet, meaning to go back inside and dry off, before going face first into his pillow. He might turn over for air sometime tomorrow.

It was as he stood that he first noticed the dog. Well, he guessed that was being a bit generous. From its mental imprint, that pup couldn't be more than 6 weeks old.

It sat there in the rain, not making a sound or movement. It simply watched him. **Odd for a pup dat young,** Remy thought. He could tell the pup was hungry, cold, and aching all over. Remy slowly crossed the six feet that separated them and crouched down to pick up the pup. "Gonna bite me if I check you over, pup?" The puppy yipped, and licked the mishapen hand reaching for him. Remy stopped cold. "Guess not," he whispered in a not quite steady voice.

Just like that, Remy knew he'd found a friend. His relationships with others had always been colored with a faint distrust, his empathy had made him so, and even his Stormy wasn't someone he was comfortable calling his friend. Their relationship was confused, based on a need for acceptance from him, and the habit of deference from her.

This mistreated little dog was his first friend. Remy's throat tightened, and he swallowed hard. He didn't understand it, didn't question it, just opened a door in his heart and this little mutt made himself right at home.

When he made physical contact with the puppy, Remy could better feel the pain the young dog was in. "Guess we best get you doctored up. No sense in de two of us hurtin dis bad, neh?"

After making his way back into the kitchen, Remy dried himself as best he could with a couple of dish towels, so he wouldn't drip all the way up to his room, and cuddled the pup to his chest as he went upstairs.

He opened the door to his room, and said "Well, pup, guess you got yourself a new home. Let's go see it."

He threw the muddy towels into his hamper, and reached into his closet for a couple of clean ones. "You up to a bath, petite?" he asked the dog. No collar, he noticed. He also noticed that it'd been some time since the pup had eaten. He could count every one of his ribs, under fur that was so matted and muddy there was no way to tell the length of the hair. Somehow, Remy knew exactly what color his eyes were, though. Even though he'd never physically see them, he knew they were a brilliant emerald green. Green as Rogue's eyes, and Ororo's ferns, he thought whimsically.

Remy gave a rueful smile, the first totally unguarded expression his face had known since a child of seven. If anyone he knew had seen that look, they never would have known it was him. Despite his scars, there was a childlike delight in the way he looked at the puppy, who gazed back at him and Remy would swear he could feel the dog smile in return.

Remy had forgotten his tiredness in the wonder of his new friend. He was reluctant to let the dog go, knowing how good his warmth felt to the puppy, and feeling how the puppy was returning that warmth straight to his heart.

Remy knew the warm water of a bath would do more to ease sore muscles than anything else he could do right now for the dog. But if the puppy were going to protest, it would be better just to keep him close, and warm.

Figuring he'd risk it, he grabbed his sweatpants, and juggled the puppy, towels, soap, shampoo, and clothes as he headed for the bathroom. Remy thought about washing the pup in the sink, but he was muddy too from holding the dog, and he wasn't one for wasting time.

He was glad no one else was there to see as he filled the bathtub, and continued to hold the pup snuggled up to him as he climbed in. "Bath time, petite." Remy leaned back into the warm water, and sighed in pleasure. The dog squirmed a bit, then curled up on Remy's chest, letting go a yawn that showed every baby tooth in his head. Remy knew he had to ease the pup down into the water, but the enjoyment of having the pup so relaxed was causing him to relax too, and remember just how tired he was. After a few moments of letting the pup nap, Remy finally stirred, and carefully transferred the pup from his chest to his hand, and clumsily began to rinse the puppy off.

As he carefully soaped and rinsed, he checked for open sores, or especially tender places, but the puppy seemed to have accepted that Remy meant no harm, and made no sounds.

"You a marvel pup. Guess we best come up wit' a name for you, non?"

**

Dang it all, thought Rogue. **Ain't it just my luck? Ah finally figure out what needs to be said, and hell if'n the person Ah need to say it to ain't nowhere to be found.**

Rogue felt somewhat relieved at the reprieve, but her conscience wouldn't let her stray too far from her promise to tell Remyâ€|what she needed to tell him.

She turned to face Jean head on. Looking her square in the eyes, Rogue squashed her pride, and asked her first favor from a member of the X-Men. "Could you find him?" There was a subtle pleading that came through, despite her almost belligerent stance.

Jean returned her look. "Rogueâ€|when Remy leftâ€|it wasn't, that is, we didn't, or rather we should haveâ€|"

Rogue had never seen Jean so at a loss. "Just spit it out, Jean. Ah gotta know where ta find him."

Jean opened her mouth, but couldn't make the words come out. She raised her hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Hang it girl, talk!" Rogue all but shouted.

Jean stared at Rogue for a long moment, while Rogue's impatience grew by leaps and bounds. "Let's take a walk," Jean said quietly.

As they drifted over the mansion grounds, Jean began to speak in a subdued tone Rogue had never heard from her. "I'm not sure where to begin," Jean admitted. "Could you tell me why you need to know? It would help me sort out what you need to know first."

"Rogue watched her feet as they wandered along. "Guess you know 'bout why Ah took off after Seattle."

"We know it was caused by something Gambit had done, but we never knew the particulars. Is it something we should know?"

"Not mah story, Jean. Don't think it makes any difference, nohow. Not to the team, anyway. When Ah'dâ€|connectedâ€|to Remy, Ah saw things from his past. A lot of things. And when Ah realized that it was R_Gambit_doin' those things, Ah just couldn't connect it with the person standin' in front of me in Seattle. Those things from his pastâ€|they scared me. Ah don't think it was any secret that Remy and Ah wereâ€|somethin' more than friends. Ah reallyâ€|likedâ€|havin' him flirt with me, and him makin' me mad just so's Ah'd fight back. Ah kept wonderin' how the same person who'd done thoseâ€|things, could be standin' in front of me, and askin' me to trust him. Ah just wanted him to go away. Not to make me have to say what Ah was feelin'. 'Cause what Ah was feelin' was sick to mah stomach. Ah looked at him, and felt disgusted, Jean. Ah really liked Remy, but Gambit kept getting' in the way. What Ah did in Seattle was to throw away Gambit like he weren't nothin' but garbage. Ah'd forgotten it were Remy standin' in front of me that day and hearin' those words. Ah hurt him worse than Ah can live with, Jean. Ah gotta make it

right."

Inwardly, Jean sighed. Knowing she was going to have to admit it all wasn't easy or comfortable. Making mistakes was ok, no one was perfect, but the whole team had made a heck of a mistake, and she was the only one aware of it.

"I don't know if I can find him for you, Rogue. I don't know if even Cerebro could find him now."

Rogue looked at her with eyes that questioned.

Jean decided she had to start somewhere. "Remy left because of us. The X-Men," she clarified. "We blamed him. For you leaving, for not being what we all thought he should be, for everything that had gone wrong between you and him. We, noâ€|Iâ€|should have known better, even then." Jean lowered her head, and studied the leaves lining the path.

"We've all come to love you, Rogue, since the day you came to us. At first, we felt proud of ourselves that we could help you, and smug that we were the family you chose for yourself. We patted ourselves on the back for accepting you, even though you'd fought against us in the past. We felt self-important as we supported you and your struggles to live with your abilities. Rather than gift Remy with those same offerings, we held back, knowing sooner or later he'd do something wrong, and then we turned on him like a pack of jackals who'd just been _waiting_ for their opportunity.

"It was all your fault. You did it. You must be some kind of scum if Rogue ditched us because of you. We threw all that and more at Gambit. Oh, we never said it out loud. But then, we didn't need to. He heard every word loud and clear.

"It would seem there was much more to Gambit than the secrets of his past that he kept so well."

Jean stopped, unsure if this was something she had the right to reveal.

"Jean, please." Rogue had taken her pride, and buried it. She needed Jean's help, and would grovel if necessary.

"Do you know Gambit is truly a remarkable individual?" A total non-sequitur that Rogue wasn't sure she was meant to answer.

"How so?" seemed safe enough, and hopefully would get Jean talking again.

"It would seem that Remy LeBeau managed to conceal more than one mutant ability from Cerebro, the Professor, and myself."

"Huh?" was the most Rogue could manage at this point.

Jean once again searched for a starting point. "When we first met Remy, we were searching for Storm, as you know. We'd finally located her, thanks to Cerebro, but she was accompanied by another mutant, with a power signature unlike any we'd ever seen before. We should have paid more attention to that anomaly. Overlooking it has done a great deal of harm.

"You know we found Storm with Remy, and Ororo refused to return without him. I think maybe you should know why Storm refused to leave him."

Jean drew Rogue into the story, as if she'd actually been there.

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The X-Men were fanned out in a half-circle, with Remy and Ororo as their focus. Jean was speaking to Remy, telling him about Ororo.

Remy listened with more than his ears, and felt the truth of what she said. "Petite?" he murmured to the child in his arms. "What you t'ink, eh?" Truthful or not, he was *not* turning this child over to these people without knowing it was what she wanted.

Ororo hid her face alongside Remy's, and her arms tightened in a stranglehold around Remy's neck. "I do not recognize these people, Remy. But I think they would not come with so odd a story if it were not true."

Remy knew any number of lies people could present as truth, but he wouldn't, couldn't sully the innocence of his companion. Remy needed the words from Ororo. "You wan' to go wit' dem, petite?"

Ororo's grip tightened even more. Remy didn't even think of protesting, knowing this might be the last time he held this beloved child. "You are my friend. These people are not. Because there might be truth in what they say, I will go, but not without you."

Remy's stranglehold on his feelings loosened for a moment in sheer, unmitigated relief. He lowered his guard enough to give a quick hug to Ororo in gratitude, and once again donned his mask of caution to face the X-Men.

"Petite say she go, but she don' go nowhere wit'out me."

Jean and the rest of the X-Men flared startlement and distrust. No way did they want this unknown mutant among them, neither did they want Ororo spending more time than she must with this man.

Remy absorbed the impact of their feelings without comment. He was far too used to that particular reaction to let it hurt him anymore.

Jean marshaled her arguments, and looked at Ororo. "Child, I know you don't remember us, but you have a home, and people who miss you greatly. We would like our friend back." She continued to tell Ororo of her life, and emphasized repeatedly how much she'd been missed. "We've been looking for you for months, Storm."

"My name is Ororo," were the first words she'd spoken directly to the X-Men.

"Yes, it is. Your name among us is Storm, because of the way you control the weather."

"Little Stormy not much bigger than a raindrop herself, " Remy whispered in her ear.

"Do not call me Stormy!" Ororo was growing more confident with each passing moment, having determined in her own mind that these people did not mean her harm.

Remy could feel that they wouldn't hurt their Storm, but had no such certainty about himself. The minute he put her down, he was vulnerable, in more ways than one.

The minute the thought crossed his mind, Ororo wiggled to get down. Remy's grip automatically tightened, not wanting to release the child, but realized he would look as if he'd been hiding behind her if he didn't set her on her feet.

Jean watched as Remy knelt to put Storm down, and didn't slide her down his body as many would have done, if they were trying to keep an eye on them at the same time. Jean had no doubt that this man was supremely aware of their every move, but Storm had priority at the moment.

Placing little 'Stormy' (he couldn't help it, the name just fit so well!) on the ground, he stood, and again faced the strangers, braced for he didn't know what.

"Petite don' go wit'out me," he said again. Storm stood beside him and took his hand. "Remy is my friend. I would like him to go with me."

Jean had a quick mental pow-wow with her teammates. The general consensus was, to quote Logan, "nobody got a prayer of voluntarily prying Storm away from that dirtball she'd hooked up with."

After checking in and clearing it with the Professor, who was most curious about this unknown mutant, Jean cleared her throat, and said "Well, it would seem that some introductions might be in order then."

They looked at Remy. He didn't even blink as he looked back from behind his dark glasses. They waited. He waited. Storm grew impatient. "I'm Ororo, and this is my friend Remy, but you can call him Gambit."

"Remy LeBeau, " he offered, after looking into Stormy's anxious face. Since these people seemed like they were plenty important to Ororo's future, best he see how the land lay before totally alienating them.

"We're a group called the X-Men. I'm Jean, this is Scott, Logan, and Bobby. Our other teammates are waiting for us with the leader of our group. The Professor would like to meet you and thank you personally for watching over Storm."

Remy let the words slide past him. These people weren't important except as a way of keeping close to Ororo. He waited, and watched.

A bit awkwardly, Jean held out her hand to Ororo. "We came by jet. Would you like to see it?"

Ororo was a basically trusting person. Which was why she'd allowed Remy to become her protector. But demons of anxiety clawed at Remy when she saw how she went to Jean without hesitation. Remy controlled everything about his environment from his movements to his feelings. He knew he couldn't control the child, but having her leave his side amongst a group of hostile (at least to him) strangers was not easy for him.

After a look at the rest of the X-Men, who were making their opinion of him exceptionally clear without having as yet uttered a single word, Remy turned to follow Ororo and Jean. "Don' t'ink none of dem goin' to turn dere back on me." Remy was knew they couldn't make a move he wasn't aware of, so the act of turning his back on the rest of the team didn't strike him as particularly hazardous. To the men of the X-Men, though, the act smacked of indifference to the threat they embodied. *That man either has more power than Magneto, or less sense than Sabretooth* Cyclops thought. Either way, the answer was not comforting.

Arriving at the mansion brought its own set of difficulties. Ororo took one look at all the plants growing around the house and immediately was entranced. "Remy, everything is so green!" And off she went to examine them more closely.

Iceman had tried to lead Remy to the Professor. Bobby should have known better than to make even the innocent gesture of tapping an unknown quantity on the shoulder.

In total silence, Remy turned, and had Bobby flat on his back with a knee on his neck. "Don' be doin' dat again, homme, neh?"

Bobby's eyes had narrowed in anger at the ease of his humiliation in front of the others, who had come running up when they heard Remy speak.

"Let Iceman go, Remy" Cyclops said.

Remy looked at Iceman, and tilted his head to the side as if considering whether he would or not. Bobby felt his humiliation turn to outright hatred that this man would count him and his abilities out without even blinking.

With the silence and grace that characterized his every movement, Remy flowed back to his feet, and walked past Bobby to Ororo. "Let's go meet dis Professor, petite."

The period following that conversation with the Professor was a time of stress, and strain as the team did it's best to absorb Remy, now renamed "Gambit".

Jean came back to the present, and blinked. "I should have seen it then. I should have seen it." Jean sounded so ashamed of herself that Rogue was startled.

"Seen what, sugah?"

"Gambit is an empath. An exceptionally powerful one. His empathy is the reason his shields are so incredibly tight, and render him virtually invisible to a telepath. He'd connected with Ororo as a

child, and her situation and his were similar enough that his mind equated helping her with helping himself. Ororo got caught in the resonance between his emotions and hers."

Rogue absorbed this information in silence. She needed time to assimilate it, but she knew there was more to come. "You said more'n one ability. We knew he could release kinetic energy."

"I said he'd concealed more than one ability. And done it from two of the most powerful telepaths on the planet." Jean actually sounded admiring.

"So, what was the other?" asked Rogue.

"Well, it may be an offshoot of his empathy, but it would seem that Remy LeBeau is capable of some form of astral projection."

"Some form of? Feel lahk repeatin' that in English?"

"The astral plane is a place where you can project your thoughts, and they take physical form. Astral projection is the act of placing your thoughts on that plane. What Remy does isn't quite that. From what knowledge I've acquired over the last several months since Remy has leftâ€|" she shrugged, not knowing how to explain.

"What?" Rogue was getting impatient again, and her voice reflected it.

"It's only a feeling, and I can't prove it. This might all be my imagination, and I want you to understand that Rogue."

"What, Jean?" Rogue was about to scream in frustration.

"The closest I can describe it would be a kind of "co-habitation". Remy can project his mind into another's without the owner being aware. It's also entirely possible that Gambit himself doesn't know this. If the past few months were real, and not my imagination, Gambit has been here, among us all, often."

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Remy dried himself off, and as best he could, fluff dried the pup with a soft towel. Taking another dry towel, he bundled the puppy in its fleecy folds, so he wouldn't catch a chill. Remy once again hugged the towel enfolded puppy to his chest, and slowly walked back to his bedroom.

Remy was thinking wistful thoughts about the soft bed waiting for him there. With a small whimper and a mental nudge, the pup reminded him how hungry he was.

"Dieu. Sorry 'bout dat, petite." Remy headed back to the kitchen. Rummaging through the pantry, he found a can of what should be beef stew. Pouring about half the can into a small bowl, he set it on the floor, and unwrapped the puppy from the towel. He set the puppy down, and filled another bowl with lukewarm water. He didn't want the puppy to put anything cold into his system until he was a lot warmer.

Remy put the rest of the stew in the refrigerator, and set the water bowl down. The puppy had been sitting quietly on the floor. "T'ink

you de oddest pup I ever know, petite. Go 'head an' eat." As if manners had dictated his hesitation, the puppy quickly scooted over to the food, and began to eat.

Remy eased into one of the kitchen chairs, and listened with a surprising degree of contentment to the small sounds the puppy made as he attacked his dinner.

"Pup, I t'ink we both gonna be happier now, neh?" Remy hugged the thought to him, and felt a warm glow. The blanket of silence that usually lay over everything like a dark shroud had lifted like so much fog, allowing small slivers of warmth to penetrate. For the first time since, well... for a long time, Remy felt a kind of peace.

The old Gambit would have scoffed at the notion of simple contentment. His old self was a mass of emotions behind tightly sealed doors, and he lived with constant tension and wariness. Even as recently as two hours ago, he was coiled tight around his pain, both physical and mental. Both in spite of and because of his accident, his time here in Canada had been a time of healing, and the uneasiness he had lived with as long as he could remember had begun to fade. He felt more ready to face the next minute, the next hour, and the next day.

He'd never been one to look to the future. He lived almost entirely in the present, and did whatever it was that needed done to make it through "right-now". The future was an abstract, and full of possibilities. He didn't know how to make sure **this** possibility came to be, instead of **that** one, which meant he couldn't control it. Non-control of any situation was not something the thief was ever comfortable with, and in the past, Remy had elevated that to a phobia.

Remy sighed, and let his thoughts simply drift, too tired to try to make specific sense of anything.

As the pup finished his dinner, he gave the bowl a final swipe to make sure he hadn't missed anything, then bounded over to Remy and sat next to his chair.

The puppy scooted close enough to lean against Remy's leg, and let out a tired yawn, going from play to peace like a child needing a nap.

Remy titled his head back to the ceiling. If he were still capable of it, his eyes would have been full of tears. "T'ank you" was all he said, but to whom he said it, only Remy would know.

"Time for bed, petite." He scooped up the puppy with his hand, and walked back to his room. "T'ink we gonna do fine."

He set the pup down at the end of his bed. It never once crossed his mind that most people thought a dog should sleep on the floor, or even outside. This was **his** pup, and having again found a connection with another living being, he was making sure that this time he didn't lose it.

It had been literally years since Remy had shared a bed with anyone. He couldn't relax enough to fall asleep with another person so close;

lack of trust in people had disallowed it. **Funny,** he said to himself. **Always hoped it'd be different w'it Rogue, but t'ink dis puppy trust me more dan she ever will.** Remy was too tired to fight off the melancholy mood creeping over him.

The puppy was still sitting where Remy had placed him. He looked up and made an inquiring yip.

Remy chuckled. "Yeah, you make your point, petite." Remy performed his nightly routine that had slowly become less awkward, but never easy. Getting into bed, he bent his knees, and half tipped, half rolled onto his semi-good arm, and swung his legs up. He clumsily grabbed the covers and pulled them up. He eased onto his back, and blew out a frustrated sigh. "T'ink I never get used to this. Can see it now, pup. Someday, dere gonna be a point where I wonder why I live like dis." Remy hadn't yet reached that point, and he couldn't quite figure why. He had noone, except the pup. It wasn't a matter of simply learning to reach out to people, or changing an attitude. People feared him, and wouldn't allow him to become part of any community. "Feel like de man in de iron mask, petite. Only he could take de mask off."

"Tch. Feelin' sorry for myself again, pup. And I got you now. So, no more cryin', neh?"

The puppy, as if he'd been waiting for Remy to finally settle, crawled his way up onto his chest, and curled up like a cat, yawning again right in Remy's face.

Remy chuckled, never realizing that it was the first time he'd actually found something to laugh over since he'd left the X-Men.

"You jus' like m'sieu Chat, non?" Chat. Name a dog Cat? Remy stifled another chuckle. The irony resurrected a pale ghost of his formerly wicked humor. "T'ink we jus' found a name for you, petite."

A tiny snore from the puppy was his only answer.

Remy smiled, and drifted into sleep.

**

"Ah Don't think Ah understand, Jean" Rogue said. "What'cha mean here among us? Wouldn't we have seen him?"

"No, not physically here. He's been...looking through our eyes, I guess is the best way to put it. I can't tell if he's doing it consciously or not. I first felt him a couple of months ago, but I wasn't sure what it was that I was picking up. It felt like fog. Well, not visible fog, but that's the impression I was getting. Sometimes it was like catching just a glimpse of something out of the corner of your eye, but when you look, it's gone, or maybe was never there at all. That's what I kept telling myself at first. Even a telepath can have a healthy imagination. But I couldn't convince myself that it was simple imagination."

Rogue asked, "What made ya' think it's Remy?"

"I began keeping much more alert, and a few weeks ago, I started

feeling a definite presence. It felt familiar, like it was someone I knew, but at the same time it was like a total stranger. Occasionally I would feel faint echoes of emotion. Mostly sadness, some anger, regret, anxiety, loneliness, fear. All of the darker emotions, none of the lighter. I started watching the astral plane more closely, and began to catch glimpses of ...something."

"Everyone has an image of themselves, or how they see themselves. Often, it doesn't exactly match reality. On the astral plane, it usually reflects the person as they wish to be, but there is never any mistaking the identity. What I was seeing on the plane told me nothing about this person; only that someone was there. It was the first time I'd ever heard of that happening. It looked like a shadowy, reddish-brown cloud. Always in motion, turbulent. One minute it was here, the next it would be there, then gone, then back again. Often it would have small streaks of lightning running through it. The lightning was red and black. That's when I connected it to Gambit. The trace amounts of emotion I was catching were enough to make me intensely curious about what Gambit was up to."

"When he left, Gambit had every reason in the world to hate us, but fear? I didn't know why he was afraid, and that bothered me far more than the loneliness. Lonely was at least explainable. Actually, by rights Gambit should have consigned us all to the devil, and gone his merry way. Those emotional echoes I was finding didn't fit in with what the should haves of the situation. The echoes were ghostlike, but complete. Meaning that if I'd caught the full strength of them, I'd be either crying for months, or a homicidal maniac. I can't quite figure which. The fact that Gambit was leaking emotions at all was more than enough to convince me that something was seriously wrong."

"So, why can'tcha find him then?" Rogue asked.

"Believe me, I've tried. After realizing that I'd ...we'd... done Gambit an injustice, I knew ...someone... would have to speak to him. I didn't know how to convince the others that we'd been wrong in condemning him so completely, and without knowing the whole story, there was no way I could. We'd never really accepted him, only acknowledged him. He went his own way, we went ours. We fought together, but never, I think, for the same reasons. So I started trying to piece the story together. I searched as far as I could, then I was going to enlist Cerebro's aid. After looking at the original data, I again realized what an odd mutant signature Gambit had, and I began to do the research into why, that we should have done a long time ago."

"Gambit's gifts combine, and work together in a way that even Cerebro can't understand. Take one away, and the others are gone as well. Enhance one, and the others are strengthened. Being multi-gifted as a mutant is rare enough, but each of his abilities are alpha class. The way his gifts combine, he is potentially one of the most gifted mutants on the planet. Except, I don't think he's aware of it. We know he spent time with Sinister. What happened during that time is something I don't think that I want to know. We admit that Sinister likes to manipulate mutant abilities. Based on Gambit's uniqueness, I would be forced to conclude that he was one of Sinister's ...experiments."

"So, if he's here, but not here, can we actually talk to him? Or can

he talk to us?" Rogue asked.

"Truthfully, I don't know. We could try, I suppose. I'm very interested in this ability seems to Gambit have. I would also like to find an explanation for his knocking me out of bed about a year ago."

"What? What the hell ya talkin' about, sugah?" Rogue rounded on Jean, her jealousy center on full alert.

Jean blushed slightly and backed away a step from the angry southern belle. "Mentally, Rogue. Not physically. Not that I'd mind that terribly either..." Jean got a daydreamy look on her face and the corner of her mouth twitched upward.

"Jean!" Rogue was a little taken aback to realize she wasn't the only one who'd thought rather...interesting thoughts about the Cajun charmer.

"Well, jeez Rogue, could anyone not think about it?" Jean still looked slightly amused. "This is Gambit we're talking about, after all."

Jean's eyes became serious again. "About a year ago, someone let out a mental cry that literally made me fall out of bed. It stopped before I completely woke up, and I couldn't find any trace of it once I'd awoken fully. I had no idea who sent it out, or what I'd heard, other than a part of a word that cut off halfway through. I couldn't find anyone else who'd heard the same, and there wasn't anything I could do about it, so I filed it away, under Q for hallucination. Until I started doing all this research on our Mr. LeBeau. That made me think it might be him, and that partial word I'd heard would seem to confirm it."

"Dang it all Jean! What, are you doin' this on purpose? Wouldja quit dancin' around and tell me what ya heard?" Rogue was more than irritated. Jean seemed to be going out of her way to draw the storytelling out.

Jean apologized. "I'm sorry, Rogue. I'm too used to laying the groundwork so everyone can understand the basics. What I heard was a voice saying "Rog-". I couldn't identify the voice as male or female, and without additional information, I made an assumption that either I'd imagined the whole thing, or whoever it was had gotten halfway through "Roger". If it was Gambit, as I think, the word was probably "Rogue".

"That still don't explain why ya can't find him now, Jean." Rogue pointed out.

"True. The why of that particular question goes something like this. Cerebro originally found him because Gambit didn't know he could be tracked by his abilities. Once he'd joined us, and learned how we'd found him, he disappeared. Well, to my abilities, anyway. It was one more oddity of his that we couldn't explain, though Henry would have loved to take him apart to find out how he did it. Cerebro could still find him, though, and so we didn't worry ourselves too much over it. It was just Gambit being Gambit. There's never been enough time to learn all we wanted to learn about our abilities. Every one of us can sometimes do something we'd never thought we were capable

of."

"After he came back from Seattle, he looked and acted like the same man, but I **_knew_* how he felt about you. There was no way he could have been totally unaffected, but because of the other things that were happening, I ignored it. Now, I've had to piece some of this together, and I don't have any kind of evidence, but I can't imagine how the particular situation we found ourselves in could have otherwise happened. We'll play "let's pretend" for a while. Gambit would have been desperately unhappy, and any psychologist can tell you that bottling up those kinds of feelings can cause a lot of damage. With Storm gone, he wouldn't have had anyone at all he felt comfortable talking to about what was happening in his heart. Gambit being Gambit again, it compounded damage that was already there. I think this might be where the pressure of emotions kept inside found a vent to the outside."

"When Gambit left, we were angry with him. Noone wanted to know where he was going, what he was going to do. We trusted him just enough to believe that he wasn't a security risk, but that was it. He was on his own. Most of us were quietly saying "Good riddance, we never liked you anyway". That was something else that wasn't true."

"Remy's known ability was to take energy, and manipulate it for physical results. With his intertwined abilities, I think his other gifts may work along the same lines. He can take emotions, and produce physical results in others with them. To put it simply, he can make you feel what he feels, or wants you to feel. I truly don't believe he does anything like that on purpose, but again, I don't know how much he knows about his abilities."

"To get back to pretending, I think this his shields may have developed a crack. If that premise is true, he would have been leaking emotions, and we would have been picking up on them. We know he doesn't trust people, and that what we do know of his background isn't exactly a childhood dream. Normally, this would have a strong impact on a person's self-image, but we all knew that Gambit's confidence and ego were healthy enough for Hitler. Or we thought we knew. We had no idea that what Gambit was showing us was nothing more than a front. Admittedly, a very, very good one, but still, only for show. Again, this is conjecture on my part, but I suspect that behind his shields, and that outgoing appearance of his, Gambit was desperately lonely, and probably didn't realize his own worth as a person."

"You're more right than ya know, sugah," Rogue quietly admitted, her eyes taking on a haunted look. "Far more right than ya know."

"Forgive me for this, but a rejection from you was probably more than he could take. He's an exceptionally strong empath, and almost certainly knew what you were feeling when you turned away from him. It would have totally devastated him. Frankly, I'm surprised he came back at all. He's truly a strong soul. So, okay, One, we have him unhappy, Two, convinced he's not worth anything, and Three, it's more than a little possible he hates himself. He'd be thinking that if he were a good person, good things would happen to him, and since what was happening wasn't good, he must be bad, too. All this would be sending out intermittent, but strong echoes through his slipping

shields. We picked up on them, and didn't even question all his years of loyalty to the team. While we'd never admitted him to our "inner circle", so to speak, he was still one of the X-Men. Nevertheless, he automatically and without questions became the villain and the outcast. We hated him, because he hated himself. We were relieved when he was gone, because he believed we'd be happier if he weren't around, and made us feel it too. I keep asking myself why I didn't see it. How could he have knowingly or not manipulated our emotions, and a telepath of my caliber not known it? I don't have an answer for that, either."

"So, here we are with it now being imperative to find Remy LeBeau, and correct the situation we, the X-Men, abetted. We reinforced his self-hatred, and his unhappiness. He's one of us, and we need to let him know that. Right now, I'm the only one who knows the whole sorry mess. I finally recognized that his emotions were affecting me, and readjusted. Once I'd done that, I was repelled by what I'd done, and the part I'd played in his leaving."

Jean's voice was growing husky, both from upset, and from speaking so long. "His recent "appearance" on the astral plane troubles me even more. There is no image at all reflected there. Just an amorphous shape with no identity attached to it. That is how Remy must be seeing himself these days. And that is not a good thing. His "appearances" here among us are unexpected, but apparently one of his gifts. But the thing that troubles me most of all, is that Cerebro can no longer locate him. Which means leaking or not, his shields are now stronger than they were, and I have no idea what happened to make that so."

**

Remy awoke to find the pup parked on his chest. That wasn't exactly unexpected, he'd gone to sleep there, after all, but now the pup was staring at him.

"T'ink maybe you wan' go outside, l'il Chat. Guess you goin' to be moving then, neh?"

The pup calmly slid down the side of Remy's ribcage, and romped to the end of the bed, where he again sat and watched him.

Remy pushed the covers aside, and swung up to his feet. Getting dressed was a chore he tried not to think about in advance, even though his wardrobe consisted of simple sweatsuits, and his running shoes were Velcro fastened. One handed as he was, it was still difficult. His mane of long hair that used to be a woman's fantasy was gone. It was something of a miracle it had grown back at all. It was getting longer, but not because he wanted it that way. He couldn't keep it out of his face, without two working hands to tie it back. It's shagginess at this point was due entirely to the fact that he couldn't stand having a stranger touch him and mentally cringe. He wasn't strong enough for that, yet.

He went to the door of his bedroom, and called the pup. "Let's get goin', Chat."

The pup looked down the sheer cliff he was perched on, and whined.

"Oops. Sorry 'bout dat, petite." Remy went back and picked up the pup. "Guess de stairs gonna be a bit much, for a while too. Let's hope you get bigger dan you are now real quick."

After shooing the puppy outside for a few minutes, Remy went about making sure the pup had everything he'd need to be on his own for a short while. "Gotta go to town and pick up de monthly stuff, pup. Maybe I find some Puppy Chow, and a couple of toys too, neh? Also gotta go see the doc again." Remy's tone went flat on the last statement. "Don' want to. Dey be talkin' bout more surgery. Don' know how much more I can take, pup. De' hurt finally be levelin' off, some. Nothin' dey can do 'bout de face, but dey t'ink maybe dey can help de hands. Don' know if it be worth it, pup. I do fine now, d'accord?"

The puppy yipped.

Remy's shoulders sagged. "Non. You be right. Dis be no life I got here. It be existing, no more. But I jus' don' know about dis surgery dey want to do, pup. I jus' don' t'ink I can handle any more pain. Each time it comes a li'l closer to gettin' loose. Don' wan no more nightmares. Don' wan' to dream anymore. Not much of a life here, but don' know what more dere is for someone like me. Gonna have more t'inkin' to do, but be doin' it later. Jus' gonna get t'rough today. Tomorrow take care of itself."

Remy played with the pup for a while, but as the sun climbed higher in the sky, Remy knew he had to get going. "Better be headin' out now, Chat. See you soon." He grabbed a ball cap and his glasses and gloves.

Chat stretched, yawned, and promptly settled in for a nap. Remy grinned. "Try to miss me a li'l, Chat." The puppy snuffled a bit, and rolled over onto his back for a quick tummy rub.

During the long walk to town, Remy's thoughts were brighter than usual. Most of the walk, he had a half smile showing, as he thought about his new friend.

Remy quickly did his necessary shopping for groceries with the aid of a stockboy, to include food for the puppy, as well as a couple of chew toys, to spare his fingers from sharp puppy teeth. They couldn't do any more damage than had already been done, but the nerves were painfully sensitive. He arranged with the stockboy to have them delivered tomorrow morning.

His steps lagged a bit as he approached the hospital. Remy had no problem getting around, unlike most other blind people. He always knew what was around him, but it was like walking through a memorized maze blindfolded. Occasionally his attention would falter and he'd walk into a table, or miscalculate where the edge of a door was. "Dieu", he said as he did that very thing. He felt his frustration level rise out of all proportion to the incident.

Temper simmering, Remy went to the desk and asked for Doctor Harrigan. The hospital was the one place where he didn't feel like the main attraction in a freak show. "Guess dey seen it all, here", he thought.

The nurse told him that the Doctor was showing a group of new interns

around the hospital. He would probably be a little while, would he like to have a seat?

"Non. T'ink I go find him. Didn' have an appoin'ment, just had a question or two for me." Remy asked for his approximate whereabouts, and strode off.

The nurse watched his still award winning backside with a smile of pure appreciation.

Remy faltered for a second in shock as he caught that, and nearly blushed. He rounded the corner, and doubled over laughing. **Didn't ink dat would ever happen again!** First a new friend, then this! His life was almost back to normal. He quickly sobered. **So okay, it's gon' be a diff'rent normal for me now. But hey, it gettin' dere, non?**

Remy heard/felt a large group of people heading toward him in the hallway, then caught Dr. Harrigan's voice. "Remy, good of you to stop by. I was just going over the hospital layout with our new group of interns. I should be wrapped up in a bit, would you like to wait in my office?"

Sitting around with nothing to do didn't have any appeal at all for the Cajun, and for the moment, his shields seemed to be holding pretty tightly; at least, he wasn't getting swamped with feelings of revulsion from these fledgling doctors. "T'ink I maybe tag along?"

"Sure, sure. Glad to have you." The doctor continued on wending his way through obstetrics, x-ray, pharmacology, admissions, and other assorted areas. Finally, he approached the emergency room. "We can't go inside at this particular moment, doctors. They're still dealing with a rather spectacular mess made by a head on collision. If you like though, we could watch from the theater overhead. Show of hands in favor, please?" After a quick count, the Dr. Harrigan herded the group towards the stairs. "Remy?" he asked. "Coming?"

"T'ink not. Don' seem much point sitting up dere listenin' to a whole lot of not'ing."

"Well, come by my office in an hour or so, all right? We'll talk then."

"Dat be fine." Remy said vaguely. He was catching something. What was it? It was pulling him, almost calling him.

**

Dakota remembered the accident. It would have been a mercy to have forgotten, but mercy was in short supply in her life these days. Every pain filled cry she mentally uttered was relieved again and again as the doctors probed and prodded, doing their best to repair her shattered body.

In some foggy, dreamlike way, she realized the anesthesia was standing between her and the screams she could feel trapped in the back of her throat.

One by one, the doctors began shaking their heads. "No hope for this

one," she heard one say. "Injuries too extensive," another added. "With these kinds of injuries, it doesn't look good," was the most encouraging thing she heard out of it all.

Her mind was filled with fog, but she heard every word, and slowly, oh so slowly, worked it through. They didn't expect her to live. **So be it,** she thought. What, after all, did she really have to stay for? The cat in the back alley she sometimes fed? He'd find another soft touch, she was sure. The parents who refused to speak to her? It would be a relief to them to have some socially acceptable excuse to not speak of her to family acquaintances. Her job? Hm....well, she supposed the customers at Kelly's Diner would ask after her for a day or two. But really, there was no shortage of down on their luck people who could replace her at Kelly's. It had been awfully nice of Kelly to hire her with no references, and nothing but his intuition to go on, but Kelly made a habit of that, and she'd just been one more in a long line of people he'd helped.

Stacked up against all the reasons it would be a relief to let go, to give up the burden her life had become, any reason she could find to stay seemed pitifully weak. In a brutal bit of honesty, she was forced to admit there wasn't one person who would miss her.

She morbidly wondered who would attend her funeral. **Does a funeral parlor hire professional mourners?**

Dakota wished she could tell the doctors to be content with having done their best. She didn't mind...much. As big a mess as she was physically, it wasn't a patch on what she felt in her head. Trying to resolve feelings, emotions, and thoughts through a thick, velvet gray blur of medication and shock wasn't easy. It was beginning to put her to sleep, too.

The doctors must think she was out cold. **Jiminy C. Frog, couldn't have the patient waking up on the operating table. It simply isn't done.** She didn't want to sleep. After all, she'd heard from the best that she was going to die. Things couldn't get much more final than that. She'd go gratefully, well...at least quietly, but she wanted these last few...hours? Minutes? Cripes, you'd think they could have been just a bit more specific. Weren't these people were supposed to be experts?

It was like knowing a date was going to pick you up Friday night, but not having a clue what time. Not that she'd had that particular experience. With the date, not the time. On the other hand, how ready do you have to be to die? Lots of people didn't get any warning at all, so she guessed she was kind of lucky. It could have been someone else traveling down that particular road today. Someone with a family. Someone who would have her hand held, and cried over because she was going away.

Gah. Where'd all this self pity come from? She was used to being alone. It's been that way more than half her life. **Gee, all 27 years of it. Whoohoo.** She couldn't remember the last time someone had physically touched her, till the doctors stitched up every inch of skin she had. Black humor danced through her. If she'd known a fatal car crash would get someone's hands all over her, she might have tried it sooner.

Ah, there. She heard the doctor give instructions to move her to a

room. Not ICU. Good. Not carrying health insurance she couldn't have afforded anyway seemed like a very smart move on her part. The hospital was unwilling to spend money on someone who was going to die, and apparently had noone else to foot the bill. She almost giggled. **I hereby promise to never reveal this to "Hard Copy"** she avowed.

She was by herself. When did that happen? When did everyone leave? She felt a stab of panic intermix itself with the twinges of pain that were growing more bold.

She was always alone. Dang it, she was dying. The reality took hold. She tried to understand what that would mean, but just felt empty. So many years wasted. She was a good person, always tried to do the right thing, and help when she could, but without someone to share things with, retrospectively it seemed kind of a pointless existence. Mortality was a word in the dictionary. Now it stared her in the face, and demanded that she acknowledge it. There was no escape.

Having a friend here would be nice right about now, she thought. At least, it would if she had any friends. She'd stopped believing she had anything to offer someone else a long time ago. The first time her father had beaten her, she'd known there was something wrong with her. Her father couldn't hate her if she were a good daughter. She'd felt shock, but nothing else at the time. Oh, the pain was there, but it was just pain. Pain alone couldn't make you cry.

Her father continued her "discipline" through the years. Her one act of both defiance and self-preservation had been to cease talking. That had been 22 years ago. As a child, when she'd felt the screams rising in the place where nightmares are born, she locked them away, along with her voice. To speak now would mean opening that overful closet, and watching all the things accumulated over the years fall free. Never! She'd never allow the horror crammed into that space to pollute what was left of her life. Besides, who would she talk to, anyways?

Wondering if she could even manage to speak again was kind of pointless, she decided. She knew the doctors were aware she didn't speak, her medical bracelet would have told them so. But it made no difference, to them she was unconscious, likely to stay that way, and if not, in too much pain to be coherent.

That she had noone to say goodbye to eliminated any lingering doubts she had about the wisdom of going without making a fuss. Not that she could have made much of a fuss, considering she didn't think she was capable of lifting a finger, but it would have been the thought that counted, she was sure.

She was glad her eyes were closed. Knowing death was creeping up on her was easier when she couldn't see it. A touch cowardly, perhaps, but bravery seemed a bit out of her reach at the moment. She gave a mental sigh.

Wouldn't you know it, she was starting to feel bored. Pain was pain, and she'd lived with one kind or another ever since she was five. It was nothing new. But to be without her beloved books was irritating. You'd figure someone would be playing a radio or something at the very least. This place was like a tomb. Bad analogy. It was awful

quiet around here.

Her sensitive hearing picked up a small commotion down the hall.
Sounds like someone ran into one of those cart thingies.

Ah well, might as well be gory and take inventory of the damage. Head injury; she knew that from both the doctors comments and the feel of bandages criss-crossing her forehead. No sensation of hair on the back of her neck. Did they cut it? Hope not. She rather liked it long, and thought she looked like a poodle with it short. Then again, no one was going to be photographing her for posterity, so the heck with it. Her face from the cheekbones down felt like all the skin was scraped off. Perhaps it was. Bandages again.

Sheesh. It would have been easier to start with what didn't hurt. Well, it was never too late to take good advice. She began again. Eyes feel all right. She sort of remembered covering them with her arm. She ran over all other pertinent body parts. The best she could figure, at least they were all still there. They hurt far too much to be otherwise.

Ah...there! The back of her left hand seemed to hurt less than everything else. She twitched it experimentally, and felt some sort of monitor fall beside her hand. An alarm went off, and with some expectation, she waited. This might rate her some company.

A nurse hustled in, panting slightly, and looked for the source of the noise. Spotting the disconnected monitor, she quickly reattached it, all the while muttering about careless aides, then bustled back out.

Dakota wondered if the nurse even looked at her while she fussed with that bit of plastic that seemed so important to her. Probably not, she decided. After all, she wasn't going to be around long enough for the nurse to have to worry about her. And again, she'd gone full circle.

Death. It was welcome, but did it have to be so...final? Reincarnation was looking better all the time. Did she have time to convert to Buddhism? She thought she might make a rather nice pet. Then again, with the way her luck was running lately, she'd wind up in the pound, waiting for D-Day.

It occurred to her that she was growing rather whimsical. It'd been a long time since she'd been able to see much amusement in anything, and so she let the mischief in her have its way. After all, what could possibly happen if she said to hell with all of her problems? The commotion down the hall had settled down, finally, but lots of footsteps were growing closer. Bigwigs on tour, she decided from all the tap taps instead of the squish of nurses crepe soled shoes.

Well, that distraction didn't last long. Bored again. Locked inside her mind, she searched for diversion. The pain she was feeling may have been a constant companion, but she'd never hurt so many places at the same time. Setting it aside was growing a bit difficult. She needed to focus on something else.

Dakota idly wondered who would end up with her books. There was something she would miss after all. Maybe I can come back and haunt a

library? Her books had been her companions when lonely, her solace when sad, and her escape from a world that seemed designed for pairs.

She started a catalogue of her favorites. Absolutely anything at all by Louisa May Alcott. Whoever thought they were children's books had certainly never read them as an adult. Simon Green, who wrote with humor dancing through his pages, Sharon Green (no relation) whose views on male/female relationships came through loud and clear. Mercedes Lackey, who's imagination took flight, and carried you with it, Georgette Heyer, writing with an old fashioned view of the world, yet managed to make you love her thoroughly believable characters. Judith McNaught, who's ability to make one feel the romance her characters feel always enthralled her. Romance, fantasy, history. These were her choices. Hm...no murder mysteries, no true crime, no death, blood, gore, sensationalism. Escapism at it's purest, it seemed. No reality may enter here. Well, Jiminy Grapefruit, she dealt with reality every day. Why should she bring its ugliness into her one absolute pleasure?

She heard the voices in the hall again. **Sounds like a herd of door to door salesmen.** The nurse had left her door slightly ajar, enough for her to clearly hear the conversations swirling from one side of the hall to the other.

"No need to stop here. This floor is relatively untenanted, and there's just enough time to get to the cafeteria for lunch."

Then she heard The Voice. "Doc?" Water over gravel. Smoke over sandpaper. Like a fuzzy warm blanket on a cold winter morning, it suddenly wrapped around her. Everything she was responded to that incredible sensation. Tears started forming under her closed lids. **Too late, too late,** her heart mocked.

She begged The Voice to say something else. It obliged. "What's wrong wit' her?" An accent she couldn't place, but enchanted her nonetheless.

"She's one of the car accident victims we saw in the emergency room. I'm afraid there's not much we can do for her."

"She be okay, though?"

A hesitation. A long hesitation. "No." No more than that.

"She goin' to die?"

The tears in her eyes grew in size. **Not going to cry!** She refused to allow it. It didn't do a smidge of good when she was five, it certainly wouldn't help her now. She made herself concentrate on the voice. Focus on one thing, and let the rest go away.

As voices go, it was well worth listening to. She wished she could listen to it forever. Or at least what she had left of forever.

The Voice had a small conference with the "salesmen" she now knew were doctors. The shoes had skittered to a stop in a cluster around her door.

"No fam'ly?"

"Not that we know of, Remy." A name! Her voice was called Remy.

"Maybe I could stay here for a while? I got time."

"We still have things to discuss, Remy."

"I got time for dat later. She don'."

"Very well, another day. But we will talk, Remy. You know as well as I what there is to be gained."

"Later, den. T'anks, doc."

The Voice - Remy - came inside her room, and pulled up a chair beside her bed.

"Hello, chere. I be Remy LeBeau. I t'ink maybe you lonely, non?"

**French! He's French. Wow. I must have some good Karma somewhere to rate one like this on my deathbed.

**

"So, if his shields are still leaking, why can't ya find him when there down?" Rogue asked, still trying to discover a way to get in touch with Remy.

"It's a needle in a haystack, Rogue. First, I have to know where to look. It's still a big globe. Second, I have to be watching at exactly the right time. Some of us still require a few hours of sleep now and then. And third...I'm afraid."

Rogue looked at her with troubled eyes. "That don't mean we can just let all this go, and pretend it never happened, Jean. Ah owe him. Ah need to set the past right. Ya'll need to set the past right, too. After that, whatever happens, happens. Ah can't imagine Remy changin' enough to turn on us, and from what you're sayin', he might need help."

"All well and true, Rogue. But does he want our help? He hasn't even sent a note to Storm. Can you imagine what he must be feeling to not even care that Storm would worry herself absolutely sick over him? I can't. No...what I mean is that I don't want to. Because I know that whatever it is that he's feeling, I allowed to continue. And I am ashamed of that. You're right. We do need to set the past right, and make our best attempt to fix the damage that's been done. Silence is not the answer, and I've held mine for too long. Let's go talk to the team. It's long past time."

**

The X-Men's initial reaction to Jean's story was mixed. No one wanted to believe her. The problem was, that even though there was no evidence, and her story was comprised of speculation and conclusion, it rang with truth. But the emotions and feelings that had circulated among them at Gambit's departure didn't go away just because they found they were not self-generated.

Jean made an offer to the rest of the team. "I know you understand the situation in your head. I also know it's a battle to work through the hatred and anger to be objective. I can help, if you would allow it." She sat back to wait and let them decide for themselves.

Cyclops was the first to respond after a moment spent collecting his thoughts. "You were right when you said we'd made a mistake concerning Gambit. I didn't listen to you, and the fault is mine. As a team leader, I should have known better than to let emotions rule. The team comes first and foremost, and every member in that team has a special place that only they could fill. We allowed ourselves to not remember the things we valued Remy LeBeau for. Not just his mutant abilities, but his way of pulling us all away from brooding on unsolvable problems. I know many of his actions were not seen in that light by the rest of the team, but I knew, and appreciated it all. He countered all our darker aspects by giving us a target to vent anger and upset on. Since he left, we've been walking around with a Gambit sized hole, and I'd like him back. I am as guilty as any for what happened, and more guilty than most. Please, Jean, I would like your help."

Jean felt her heart remember again why she loved this man so. "Of course, Scott." Her mental bond with him pulsed with her emotions, and a faint glimmer of tears shone in her eyes. She leaned over, and placed her hands on his, closing her eyes to better concentrate.

She deftly removed traces of Gambit's unintentional tampering. As she accomplished this, she also erected a slight barrier against any further leakage the Cajun might do when or if he ever returned. She had to work around their bond, and knew that Cyclops would be more vulnerable than the others due to that, but to close all possible contact against Gambit, she would have had to sever the bond, and neither she nor Scott would condone such a solution.

One at a time, the others agreed to allow Jean to assist. All but one, that is.

**

Remy didn't really try to analyze what brought him to this particular bedside. Just a feeling, really. A need. His or someone else's; did it really matter?

He looked over the figure in the bed. "Me'n you got a lot in common, chere. More'n you might ever know. Bet you wonderin' why I be campin' out in here, neh? Truth, chere, don' know myself. But I know 'bout bein' lonely, an' I know lonely when I feel it. Don' know if you can here me, chere, but I don' wan' anyone bein' so lonely as me. As I was, dat is. I t'ink I found a new frien', yesterday.

Remy told her about his puppy, and went on to skip through his life, giving her story after story about what it was like to be him. This new Remy was more at ease simply talking than the old one could ever have dreamed of being. But there were still areas of his life that he kept sealed away from even his own memories. Demons that would shred his sanity if they ever got loose.

Dakota let his voice flow through her. It reminded her of how she felt as a child, cuddling a teddy bear, before her father found it had it destroyed. That close your eyes and snuggle feeling that you could only get at night, with everyone gone, and only your toys to hear your secrets.

After being disowned by her parents, she'd moved from town to town, never able to get a decent job because of her vocal handicap. She'd lived hand to mouth, never knowing what tomorrow would bring, so she learned not to rely on something unless she had it in her hands.

She listened to his stories, and the emotions behind them. She'd had an awful lot of practice at that. When you couldn't talk, people acted like you were stupid, or something. They'd say the most incredible things right in front of you, and act surprised when you understood. She'd had to learn to read people in self-defense, hoping she could avoid contact with those who she could tell were going to treat her like Forrest Gump, or something. She hoped Remy wasn't like that. Of course, he didn't know she couldn't talk, so she'd have to see about that part. He also thought she was dying, and so anything he said couldn't ever be repeated. She'd long ago learned to look past what was being said, and hear what voices would say without using words and she now put that particular talent to use.

Remy needed love. **Pfff. Like I'm the most qualified person on the planet to recognize that one.** It was true though. The total lack of love in her life made her eminently able to recognize another person whose heart was dying.

There was a small hesitation in Remy's voice, but then it flowed on again.

She'd always managed to get by, though. She was one of those people who you could never remember five minutes after you left there presence. She was ordinary from the top of her average brown hair, down an average female body, to her quietly moving feet. She had always been that way. It was far better to fade into the woodwork than attract her father's attention, far better to keep to herself than to attract the attention of others who would tease or torment her. As an adult, calling attention to herself meant calling attention to her handicap, and what was left of her pride wouldn't allow it, knowing others would pity her, or worse yet, would think she must be slow or something. So she kept her personality well in hand, and well hidden, deep inside.

Habits of a lifetime dictated that she not call notice to herself. If she wanted to continue having Remy talk to her like a real person, she needed to become part of the bed beneath her. Turn herself into her old teddy bear. Be a non-person.

Time was passing; how much she had no idea. But Remy's voice was getting huskier with each word. Soon he would stop speaking. She didn't want that to ever happen, but she had no claim on him. He was playing white knight, to her supposed damsel in distress. Had she known Remy Lebeau a year ago, she'd have broken into hysterical laughter at the thought of that, but it's as well she didn't. This Remy had learned how to give, without any expectations.

She was taking a great deal of his time. It must have been a couple

of hours, at least. **Why is he doing this for me?** she wondered.

"Don' know why I'm tellin' you all dis, petite." It was almost like he was answering her unspoken question. "Used to be, if I wanted to talk, I had Stormy. Tol' you 'bout her, didn' I? Or sometimes, most times, I jus' go up on de roof, and watch the worl' go by. Always does, whether I be dere, or not. Been hard, dis las' year or so. Stormy be gone, an' don' have nobody to talk to 'bout t'ings, an' ...well, I jus' can' get up on de roof no more. Used to be lots of t'ings I wouldn' tell Stormy 'bout, but I knew she was dere. But now, well, dere are jus' some t'ings you can' tell nobody, an' you can' let nobody know dey dere." Remy drifted into silence.

Poor Remy.

"Don' be feelin' sorry for me, petite. I do all right. I got Chat now, and t'ings be lookin' up. Did I tell you dey wan' do more sur—" He stopped for a moment. "Non. Not goin' dere. I don' t'ink you can hear me, but I don' wan'...I jus wan'..." He was silent once again.

You just want to be you, and not have to explain what you are to anyone.

"You're right. I just w—" There was a nine month and one week pregnant pause. "Did I jus' say what I t'ink I said?"

He heard me?

"Mon Dieu! Petite...you talkin to me."

Dakota reeled in shock. But being in a somewhat perverse mood after her rather trying day, she recovered quickly. **Well, if you're the satin and smoke voiced Frenchman sitting next to me, I would think that yes, I'm talking to you. Not that I want to believe it either. But...well hell. Why not? There are worse things that could be happening to me. What's a little delusion among friends?**

**

"Jean, A'hm right sorry, but there just ain't no way in tarnation Ah'm gonna let you mess with mah feelin's about Remy." Rogue was adamant, and there wasn't any changing her mind.

"Rogue, all I'm going to do is erase the emotions he accidentally forced on you. I'd also like to put a small barrier in place so it doesn't happen again." Jean was honestly bewildered by Rogue's refusal. Her stubbornness was also causing her no end of irritation.

"Jean, me'n Remy LeBeau got our problems. But they're our problems, and Ah'm gonna be the one to fix them. That is, if you can ever find him." Rogue scowled at Jean.

Jean finally lost her patience and her temper. "Rogueâ€¦ just what the hell do you want from me? I have told you again and again why I can't find him. You hear what you want to hear, and pay no attention to the rest, and I have had enough of it! Now for once in your stubborn life

you will listen! You are the one who screwed up. You are the one who started this whole mess. And so, **_you_** find him!" Jean turned her back on Rogue, and strode off, her red hair practically shooting sparks.

Rogue's own red-haired temper ignited. "Don't think I won't! Couldn't do no worse!" As the rest of the team watched in disbelief, she launched herself out the study window, into the sky, nothing more in her head than to get away.

Three miles later the anger gave way to something approaching reason. **Damned if 'n I didn't do it again. Runnin' away ain't gonna solve nothin', it's just gonna make it a whole lot harder to go back.** She flew lazy loops in the sky, thinking.

After a couple of hours, with all her stubborn determination in hand, she sought out Hank.

"Ah need your help, Beast," Rogue said, walking in to his lab.

"Certainly, Rogue. And what can this marvelously insightful genius do for you today?" Hank's good nature was firmly in place. He suspected that for Rogue to seek him out, the situation was going to require nerves of steel.

"Can a person really change?" Rogue was staring at everything but Beast as she asked that question. "I mean, not just act different, but really be different?"

"Philosophy is not my strong point, Rogue. I assume we are speaking about yourself? Or am I assuming too much?"

"Oh, it's me all right. See, doc, all my life, I've been told the only person Ah could ever trust was my mama. Now, I know in my head that that just ain't true, but Ah think Ah've been still believin' it in my heart somewhere. There ain't no other way to explain why Ah do the things Ah do, sometimes. And Ah don't want to be the person that Ah am anymore. Ah don't like the way Ah do things. Ah don't like runnin' away being my first response. Ah don't like losing my temper without thinking about what was said first. And Ah specially don't like withholdin' trust from my friends. But tryin' to be different ain't near the same thing as actually bein' different. So you tell me, Hank. Can a person actually change? Or am I stuck being somebody Ah don't much like, these days."

Hank was silent for a while, as he thought about what to say. "Rogue, I'm not sure I'm the best one for you to talk about this with, but I'll give you my opinion, for what it's worth. Yes, these are some character traits that are considered undesirable. However, your childhood makes it remarkable that you have become the person you are. These traits you so dislike were instilled at a young age, and therefor have the strength of years behind them. I don't see this as something you should be disliking yourself for, but I would agree that they need to be changed. It's a difficult proposition at best, Rogue. It would take time, and a great deal of effort.

"However, I also believe it to be a matter of training. We can train dogs not to bark, we can train children not to interrupt adult conversation, its even been possible to train Bobby. If this is more

than a theoretical conversation, I think I could help, but just how committed are you to this?

"My name is Noah."

**

Remy was shaken, but kind of intrigued. "We friends, chere? Bien, I can live wit' dat. I jus' startin' to realize dat I need friends. But one small t'ing, petite. Dis boy is Cajun, not French."

Cajun. Hmm...so maybe her karma wasn't as great as she'd thought, but that accent was still tripping her interest meter.

"Don' quite know how to deal wit' dis, chere. Didn' expect it. If you a telepath, how come you not talkin' to me before?"

Well, nosy, mostly because I'm not a whatchadoohicky...telepath. They can read minds, right? I can't. Not that I'd want to wallow in the garbage that seems to be in most people's minds. I haven't the foggiest why I seem to be able to talk to you. Dakota gave in to her curiosity. **What's my voice sound like?**

"Sounds like a girl, petite. What do you mean, what's it sound like? Sounds like you was talkin' in my head."

Doofus. You know, I like you, but we really do need to work on you a bit. I don't ask dumb questions. Well, let me rephrase that a bit. I don't ask any questions. See a silver bracelet they probably hung from my chart?

"Yeah, chere. I know it's there." His voice had gone from confused to flatly resigned.

What'd I say? She knew she'd stumbled on a nerve, but couldn't figure what.

"Nothin', chere. You need this bracelet for some t'ing?"

I thought I'd decorate for my funeral. Sheesh. Some peoples children. Read it, silly.

"Non. Chere....I....non." Remy tried to stumble into an explanation, but he didn't need pity. He didn't want pity. He most definitely didn't need or want her pity.

Remy was reevaluating for all he was worth. He'd felt sorry for her, so he thought he'd talk to her. She didn't seem to have anyone, and dying alone was something he was learning he'd probably do as well. It frightened him. If he could give this to her, maybe someone else would do the same for him.

She wasn't supposed to actually hear him. Well okay...she was supposed to be comforted in some nicely foggy way, and die in peace. This was not the way it was supposed to happen. She was two point one steps away from feeling sorry for him, and that was a pit he'd just crawled out of. No way was anyone going to put him down there again.

"Not goin' to do dis, homme. Non. Won' let you do dis, " he all but

growled.

Dakota panicked. He wasn't going to leave her here, was he? She'd made him angry. Oh god, what had she done? She knew better than to talk to anyone, didn't she? She knew that talking made people leave her. Stupid! How could she be so dumb? **Please don't go. I'll be quiet. Please? I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything, please?** She knew she was babbling, but she just couldn't be alone again.

Remy was instantly ashamed of himself. "Non, chere. Non â€|shhhh, I'm de one who's sorry. Didn' mean to get angry at you. I'm de one I'm angry at. I...got some problems I'm working out, an' I snapped at you when you got too close. I'm sorry."

Dakota didn't say anything. She didn't want him to go away, and she was so scared that he would anyway. She all but held her breath, waiting for him to speak.

"Please petite. I t'ought we were gonna be friends. I need a friend, neh?" Remy knew, although he didn't understand why, it was important that she forgive him. Like Chat, she hadn't asked him if he wanted to care for her, she just moved in and took residence in his heart. All that sarcasm. It reminded him of himself, and the way he used it to deflect attention from the real person inside.

Her continued silence tore at him. "Chere, don' leave me out here all alone. I don' know how to be alone anymore. Been learnin' all kinds of lessons dis past year or so, but de first one I learned is dat you can be anybody you want to be, so long as someone believes in you. It's when no one believes in you dat you become nobody. I been nobody for too long, chere."

She was making him apologize for her shortcomings, she realized. That was entirely unfair. He was blaming himself, she was blaming herself, and both of them were unhappy with the situation. The difference was, he was trying.

Remy, I'm sorry. It was a quiet whisper of a thought, but it reassured him that she was still with him.

"Non. No more sorry." Remy hesitated, almost fearing to ask his next questions. "Chere, how much dey tell you, here?"

Temporarily, she ignored his question. She was still subdued, not wanting to upset him again. **Remy? Can I ask you something, please?**

"Anyt'ing, petite . Don' promise I can answer, but I try, neh? But I need somet'ing from you first. Well, two t'ings. First, your name. Don' use names much, but I wan' to know who dat person was who was talkin' to me earlier."

Going schizo on me Remy? She was aghast. Hadn't she just told herself to play it cool? Her smartmouthing him was going to make him leave! **I'm sorry. I didn't meant to get sarcastic. My name is Dakota.**

Remy was amused. "T'ink I like sarcastic better." He grew serious again. "Meek don' suit you, chere. An' dat's de second t'ing I need from you chere. I need you to be you."

She was relieved, and so happy she felt giddy. **Actually, I like being Cindy Crawford much better.**

"Cindy Crawford not why I still be sittin' here, chere. Dakota. Interesting name, petite. Named for Nort' or Sout'?"

Truck. And to answer your question that you're being oh, so careful not to repeat for fear of upsetting me, yes, I know that I'm going to die. I'm also kind of curious why I haven't done it so far. Death's door is open, and it's letting in something of a draft.

"Maybe it's 'cause I don't want you to go, petite. I came in here because somet'ing was pullin' at me, an' I couldn' jus' walk by. When doc said you didn' have nobody, an' he didn' t'ink you were goin' to make it, I jus couldn' leave you to be alone. 'Cause I know how dat feels, chere. Don' ever wan' to have someone else feel it because I allowed it.

"I like you chere. We're friends, d'accord? All dem stories I was telling you, even 'bout Stormy, not one of dem had a frien' in it, 'cause I don' have any but Chat. He's a new frien', and now I know why frien's are so valuable. You prob'l'y have lots of friends, so one more don' matter, but I can' lose one just because she was in de wrong place at de wrong time. Le Bon Dieu would be playin' one too many tricks on me."

Silly Cajun, tricks are for kids. Besides, it's not like I have much of a choice, here Remy.

Remy...when I first heard you, I was angry. Here was Prince Charming, and Sleeping Beauty didn't exist. I'm going to get all maudlin and sappy here for a minute, but I figure you need to hear this. If I had much of a heart left to give, it'd be yours for no other reason then caring about me when no one else does. It's a good thing I'm not going to be around for long, because that's not a very healthy way to live. Oh, it sounds great in all the books, but I can't see you needing me forever. Nor can I see me being grateful to you forever. For now, we can be friends, but it can't be forever, Remy. No matter how bad I might want it. You have a life away from this hospital, and I don't. Not anymore.

Besides, you were right. And wrong. I know lots of people, and I couldn't possibly know any more until one of them dies, or something. But I don't have friends, either. That's a pretty odd word, when you think about it, isn't it?

"How do you mean, chere?" Remy was in awe of the way this little imp's mind was working.

Well, it's a noun, used to describe a feeling. A friend isn't a thing. It's a feeling in your heart when you see someone. Yeah, okay, so I'm not an English major. Actually, I almost flunked English in school. I should have been born German or something. Then I could have flunked in a foreign language, and had it sound much better.

Remy laughed out loud at that. "Chere, you be priceless."

A nurse passing by poked her head in the door at the sound of

merriment. She looked confused, then alarmed and looked away rather than see Remy's face again. "Sorry....thought I heard....well, I have things to do. Sorry." She quickly closed the door.

Poor thing probably thinks you've been sniffing the happy gas they must have around here somewhere, Remy. If I saw someone laughing at a comatose body, I'd probably call the funny farm myself.

"Dat's not why she left, chere" Remy's voice had gone lifeless again. For a while, he'd forgotten how the world saw him. And how it made him feel dead inside. He'd been riding an emotional high since yesterday. First Chat wormed his way into his life, and made him look forward to the next day. Then he'd seem to have been regaining some control over his shielding, and he hadn't felt a twinge all day. He'd actually laughed today, and for a moment felt every bit as cocky as he'd used to. And his new friend, Dakota, had enabled him to escape his physical limitations for an entire afternoon. But the look in the nurse's eyes the first time she'd seen him had brought it all crashing back down. It was all the worse for his brief period of freedom. **She mus' be new here. Thought everyone 'round here'd seen de freak.**

Talk to me Remy. Why do you sound like you just found out you're going to prison for life?

"Good way to put it chere. 'Cept the prison is me."

I'm not going anywhere, oh mighty Cajun one, and you're beating yourself up about something. So have a Scooby-snack, and tell your best buddy Dakota all about how you screwed up in a royal way and everyone hates you now.

Remy was ruefully amused. "Chere, I'd love to be able to give you a hug."

Don't go there, Remy. I'm only 2 steps from getting your shirt all soggy anyway. Besides, you'd probably set off fourteen different alarms, and give me high blood pressure. You wouldn't want all that on your conscience, now would you?

"You're right, petite. I got too much dere now."

You are getting very sleepy. Verrry sleeepy. You are now going to quit stalling and get to the juicy stuff, buddy.

Remy chuckled. "You good for me, chere. So, you want the abridged or full lengt' version of de life of one Remy LeBeau, former child prodigy?"

I want the truth. I can handle the truth. God, I loved that movie. Anyways, what I want is for you to let me give you this gift, Remy. Let the poison go. You gave me something no one else ever has. You're the first person to hear me since I was five. You gave me compassion. Let me give you this much. Let my life, well, death anyway, mean something. Let me have done something I can feel good about.

Remy blew out a sigh. His hand was trembling as he reached for hers. "Chere, I'm goin' to take hold of your hand. Don' be frightened." Slowly, he forced the stiff and awkward appendage to cradle her cut and bruised hand.

Dakota stayed still, knowing any reaction from her could send him bolting, he sounded that nervous.

"Dakota...you even awake? Can you feel dis?" **Or do I so badly need to touch someone dat I'm hallucinating de whole t'ing?**

I'm awake, Remy. I feel you, but it's a foggy kind of feeling. I suspect they've got me doped to the gills. I was thinking I could totally freak out the doctors by opening my eyes on the examination table, but figured that would be kind of tacky.

"Do me a favor, chere. If you open your eyes, don't scream, okay?"

Why? You gonna yell boo or something?

Remy searched for words and came up empty. He felt a little silly for believing Dakota could kiss the hurt and make it all better, but his emotions had been on a seesaw this last few minutes, and he was vulnerable.

Would it make it easier on you if I just chattered a bit? Dakota felt waves of something practically rolling off her new friend, and she wanted to give him a bit of time to compose himself

"Dieu. Didn't think it would be dis hard, chere. Tell me 'bout you, petite." Remy's gaze was focused on her hand, where it lay curled trustingly in his deformed one.

Grim story. Got your blankie? Well, you asked, you shall receive. Born approximately 27 years and some odd days ago to a couple of people I shall euphemistically call mom and dad. Mom died shortly thereafter. I don't remember her at all. But if she were still alive, I'd have long ago killed her myself for leaving me with a monster like my father. Ooooh. That was bad. ! Well, what are they gonna do; make me do the filing at the DMV?

Anyways, back to the monster. Trust me, Dr. Frankenstein had nothing on this guy. This was one seriously deranged dude. As a little side note here, you really are the only one who can hear me, such as it is. I quit talking when I was five. I was sort of screaming, and couldn't stop, so he taped my mouth shut for 3 days.

I never went to school. Somehow, I totally slipped through the cracks. No one even knew my father had a child until one day when I was 17, he unlocked my room and told me to put on a dress. He said he was getting married again, and didn't see how he could avoid telling his new wife about me. So, I was brought out like a dutiful little pet, and everyone said wasn't it so sad that the poor thing had to be kept on medication to keep from hurting herself.

But I had books, Remy. All the books I'd ever want. I learned everything from them, including how to escape. So, I was 19, and on my own for the first time. My "parents" made a fuss to the papers about how ungrateful I was, and I shouldn't ever come back. Truthfully, I should think they'd have been scared spitless about me coming back and blowing all their stories sky-high.

I had no skills, and no money to acquire any, but I managed to land a job washing dishes at a local restaurant, and for the first time, I was actually proud of myself. I'd accomplished something I never had before, simply by standing on my own two feet.

Have I made your ears numb yet?

Remy was abashed, and felt humbled. This lady had guts, determination, and survival instincts that equaled and surpassed his own.

He took a deep breath and began. "Few years back, I hooked up wit' a bunch of people who convinced demselves dey could make de world a better place. Didn' believe dem, but I liked myself better for helping dem. Up til den, I was a t'ief. A good one, maybe de best, but still a t'ief. Dere are some t'ings I did during dat time I can't tell you 'bout, chere. Don' t'ink I ever can. Mos'ly don' t'ink about dem. Dey in de past, and dey gonna stay dere."

"I met dem people because of Stormy. Tol' you 'bout her, didn' I? Well, me'n Stormy went wit' dem, and I met ...Rogue." Her name word still had to be forced out. "T'ink I, non, I know I fell in love wit' her de minute I saw her. Don' know why. She's stubborn as a bayou gator, and twice as t'oughtless. Didn' trust nobody, didn' need nobody, least of all me. But I loved her, and Dieu, how I wanted her."

Dakota's heart was breaking as she heard the heartache in his voice. It broke again because there was nothing she could do to help ease it.

"Bout a year and a half ago, somet'ing happen, an' she foun' out about a part of my past. One of dem dat I don' never tell nobody." Remy stopped for a minute, to regain a bit of control. "She ran, but she made sure I knew what she thought of me 'fore she left." Remy drew a ragged breath. "I have dis...ability...to sometimes tell what other p eople be feelin'. Mos' times, it don' bother me 'cause I don' use it. I started losin' control of it around then, so I knew what she was feelin' when she ran away from me. An' it was jus' like I was 16 again, and Poppa was sayin' how proud he was of me for followin' his footsteps in de T'ieves Guild, and all de time he was feelin' scared of me, and disgusted at de freak he'd brought into his home. People sayin' one t'ing, and feelin' somet'ing else."

"Dat was a rough time, chere. Rogue left de group, an' I was to blame. De others, dey don' know what I did to make her leave, but dey know I was de reason why. Dere was not'ing I could do to fix de situation, an' I was makin' it worse by stayin'. Figured if I left, she could come back. Dey were her family, not mine, and I was de one keepin' her away. So I disappeared. Wandered 'round for a while, den came here."

"Las' year, I got caught in a fire. An....I got some problems 'cause of it. Dere no way I can lead a normal life. Right now, I just be gettin' de hang of t'ings, agai n. Den you come along and jumbled it all up. Don' know what to make of you, petite. Don' know where you fit in to dis new life I got. But I do know dat you not goin' to leave me to figure all dis out by myself. Dere ain' no way I'm goin' to let you leave me on my own."

Baby...you're right. You do need someone. But it can't be me. I'd love to be your someone. In spite of all this garbage, I think I love you. But pay attention here, lover. I'm dying. Irreversible conclusion, there. You have problems, yes. And we're going to find a way to fix them, but you _are_ going to be doing it on your own.

Remy's head bowed. He touched his forehead to the back of her hand. "Chere, don' t'ink I can. I gave all I had, and it didn' come even close to being enough." He thought back to all his walks home from the hospital. "Chere, I frighten people. Dere ain' no two ways about it. Jus' can' go back to de team. Dey don' want me, and I got no place dere. I got no family dat would be happy to see me. Dere not anybody on dis earth who'd miss me if I left. I got Chat, t'ough. Don' deserve him, but he don' care what I look like. He likes me, petite, but I got no purpose. No reason to fix t'ings. An' if you go, dat's one less t'ing dat keeps me here, neh?"

**

Hank gazed thoughtfully at Rogue for a long while. She fidgeted, not meeting his eyes.

"Noah?" Hank asked

Rogue's head whipped around. "What?" she almost snapped.

"Just checking." Hank stifled a chuckle at her half-covered resentment. "So, how do you feel about telling me your real name?"

"Nervous. Not sure I did the right thing." Rogue was visibly edgy, the words coming forth reluctantly.

"Why are you nervous? What possible harm could I do by simply knowing your name?"

"Mama always told me ya don't give information about yourself away. Ya never know what they'll do with it." Rogue's voice was halting, but she was determined to make herself deal with this problem.

"It strikes me, Noah, that despite everything Mystique has done to you, despite knowing she was terribly misguided in her actions, you are still doing your best to please her. Why?" Hank was prodding her to understand her actions, instead of merely reacting.

"She loved me, Hank." Rogue said, like it was such an obvious a conclusion a two year old should have gotten it.

"Serial killers can love people, too. Does that mean people live their life like Charles Manson would want them to?"

Rogue ran head on into the fact that however much she might not like Henry McCoy right now for pointing that out, he was right. She was still trying to please someone who didn't deserve it. Mystique was not a nice person, even though she'd been kind to her as a child.

Rogue dealt with that for a minute in silence. "Ah got some thinking to do, Hank." She walked slowly out of the room, eyes focused

inward.

Hours later, Rogue was still sitting on the roof. It was here that she felt closest to Remy, and she needed that uncertain contact right now. She was in the middle of altering her whole world, and she needed something stable to anchor herself. Her relationship with Remy was nothing like stable, but her emotions were telling her that it was the only acceptable thing about her life at this moment. She examined her character like Sherlock with a new mystery. Conclusion A: She wasn't a very nice person. Conclusion B: She wasn't very proud of herself, either. Her depression was growing by leaps and bounds as she looked at her life with an eye towards seeing just how far she'd let Mystique's teachings dominate her thinking. Oh, she'd known it in an offhand sort of way, but this was the first time she'd really thought about it.

All right. So Ah don't much like mahself, right now. Mostly 'cause Ah don't think before Ah do things, and people get hurt. People like Remy, who'd never in any way, shape or form done anything to her to deserve what she'd done to him. **This ain't right. Ah want to change. Ah'm goin' to change.** Determination gave her thoughts the strength of iron. She felt the rightness of that decision settle over her like mist on a meadow.

Rogue constructed a vow to herself. No more thoughtless reactions. She was going to make herself actually think before she said a single word to anyone for the next week. Saying she could do it forever was a pie-crust promise; easily made and easily broken. But she could do it for a week. After that, she'd do it for another week. And another. And another. Until she didn't have to promise herself she'd think before she said something that couldn't be taken back. Words could cause pain that may be forgiven, but wouldn't ever stop hurting unless they were forgotten. What she'd thrown at Remy hadn't been words, but that only made it worse. She'd struck at the heart of him, and the damage she'd done would always leave scar tissue, if it managed to heal at all.

Henry had shown her the way to find her own answers. No one could make the changes for her, it had to come from her heart. **Was this how Remy felt when he found Ororo?** For the first time, Noah thought about how Remy must have had to change, too. She deepened her understanding of the Cajun, and felt somewhat in awe of the strength of purpose and convictions he must have had, to make a complete about face from his old life.

She began to understand that there was so much more in addition to what she already thought she knew about Remy Lebeau. She wondered, **Can your example teach me how to be better, Remy? Can you believe me when I say you've already taught me to admire you? Can you teach me how to love you?**

No, she realized, that was one thing that she didn't need to be taught.

**

Dakota blew a mental sigh. **Remy, you can't take this on yourself. There's times that fate interferes and blows your plans to hell in a coal car, but it's not your fault. Life isn't something you can get mad about. Fate isn't a person you can yell at. There are times when

being who you are can make a difference, and times when God himself has to bow to the rules. This is one of those times, baby. No, I don't particularly want to die. This morning, that would have been another story, but there is nothing I can do about it. I can't magically decide I don't want to die after all, but hey, thank you for the offer.**

Focus on the good, Remy. Go watch Peter Pan. Skip rocks on the river. Build a sand castle. Do anything you want, but understand that you cannot control the future. My dying is not part of some great and intricate plot to ruin your life, it simply is. You have a responsibility to yourself to live in a way that makes you happy. So listen, this is the way it's going to be. You can be sad about me for a while, but I didn't have a sad life. Tough, yes, but not sad. Your staying sad about me would be telling the world that I never did anything that made anyone happy, and that isn't true. You laughed, and you smiled at me. That's what I want you to remember about me. How I made you smile. It's a beautiful smile, Remy. I'm sorry I won't see more of it.

Remy made a choked sound, and lifted his head from her hand, but not his eyes. "Chere, I hear what you be sayin', but it's hard believin' it. Specially dat part 'bout my smile. Dat fire I was tellin' you 'bout messed me up but good. Don' look like nothin' dat anyone could like. Don' see many people who can look me in de...eyes. Petite, in some ways I be glad dat you not awake. Dis way you never look at me like ever'one else. Dis way you won't have to fight de screams ever'body wants to make when dey first see me."

Remy?

Remy's tone was still a little choked, and a lot lifeless. "Yeah, chere?"

Who said I wasn't awake?

**

Rogue went on the hunt for Jean. After an hour of fruitless searching, she decided the best thing to do would be to wait for lunch time, and waylay her then. That decision reached, she found she still had time to kill, and nervous energy to burn. Her restlessness wouldn't allow her to sit quietly enough to read, or watch a movie. She figured this was probably the perfect time to test out her promise. She headed for the last spot she'd seen another person.

Storm was on her hands and knees, weeding out her garden. Rogue stood back, out of sight, deciding on the best way to approach her. She and Storm had never been all that close, and Remy's leaving had widened the rift substantially. Storm had never said anything about it to her, nor did she ever imply anything with her actions, she'd simply, withdrawn from Rogue. There were no more teasing comments, no more spontaneous shopping trips. Storm was still a teammate, but not a friend.

"Are you planning to stand there all day, Rogue?" Ororo asked, without turning around. The anger she felt towards Rogue for driving away her Remy was still there, chilled, but smoking like dry ice.

Rogue reminded herself of her promise to think first. "Ah, um, Ah was wonderin' if you could use some help?" Not exactly what she wanted to ask, but she was going to have to work up to that.

Storm didn't even blink at the unexpected offer. It was fairly obvious that Rogue wanted something from her, she would simply wait it out. "You may assist me with clearing out these beds."

"Sure. Which ones ya pullin'?"

"Preferably the weeds." Ororo felt a glimmer of amusement at the younger woman's uncertain look at the rows of flowers.

Working side by side with Storm outside of the Danger Room or a mission was something new for Rogue. Working alongside anyone outside of those parameters was new to her. She turned over and over in her mind possible ways to begin a conversation with Ororo. Finally deciding on one, she spoke.

"Didja ever wonder what you're life would be like if'n you'd made a decision sooner, Ororo? I mean, if you'd decided you liked bein' a Goddess more'n you liked bein' an X-Man, what would your life have been like?"

"Dull." Ororo saw no need to indulge Rogue's rambling. She simply waited for the important question.

Rogue wanted to call it quits right then. She felt her temper flare at Storm's refusal to respond to a perfectly civil question. A deep breath, and a reminder of her promise kept her where she was. Remy'd had to put up with this kind of thing on a continual basis from everyone on the team, and he'd managed. She had been given the example; she only had to follow it.

She slammed a steel plate over her temper, and tried again. "Ah guess what Ah was really wantin' to ask, is what you think of Remy? Ah mean, Ah know you an' him are friends, and all, but why? Ah mean, he weren't that nice a person way back when. Why did he change? And why do ya like him so much?"

Ororo sat back on her heels and stared at Rogue with cool eyes. "I like Remy LeBeau because he cares when no one else does. How many of us remind ourselves of our life's mistakes every day? How many of us are here for no other reason than they are trying to pay a price? We are the X-Men. We are hated, feared, admired, all manner of descriptions about us are everywhere we appear. Which of us has never said he was an X-Man? And yet, which of us has stayed, despite knowing he was here on sufferance? I like Remy LeBeau for all these reasons, and more I will not share with you. Most of us were invited to join with the Professor's dream, but not Gambit. He stayed because I would not let him leave. As a child, I had no concept of the life he'd led before he rescued me from the Shadow King. A thief was merely another job occupation to me. As an adult, I do not question his life's choices. I accept Remy for who and what he is. And who and what he is is someone I greatly admire. As to why he changed, that you will have to ask him. I have never known him to be other than himself." Ororo looked at Rogue for another long minute, before she released her gaze, and returned to clearing weeds.

Rogue felt Ororo's attention leave her completely, as if she were no longer there, or no longer important enough to rate any attention. Her temper spiked again, and this time she bolted the steel plate down. **I can do this,** she reminded herself.

"Thanks, Storm. You've given me a lot to think about." Even though she was keeping a stranglehold on her temper, she responded politely, and honestly. "Ah wanted ta tell ya," she paused and took a deep breath, "Ah've done a lotta things Ah'm gonna be trying' ta do some makin' up for, but Ah want ya ta know, Ah'm right sorry for makin' Remy leave. Ah'm gonna go find him, and Ah'm gonna try to bring him back. And if'n Ah can't, it's gonna be my turn ta leave. He deserves to have friends, and what with Jean fixin' everybody so's they don't hate him anymore, he's got his right here. Ah'm sorry for how what Ah did hurt ya." Rogue's voice drifted into silence, as she waited anxiously for some response.

Storm's hands stilled, and she spoke without turning her head. "I believe that is the first time I've ever heard you apologize. I find that I have one to make as well. While what you did must have deeply hurt Remy to make him leave, and I am greatly angered at you for being so thoughtless. I am angry at Gambit as well for leaving without saying a word to me. To hurt me like that was as if he was saying I didn't matter. I did not want to be angry with Gambit, and so I directed that anger as well at you. I cannot say I forgive you, but you have shown me I was wrong in allowing you to take the blame for all of my anger." Storm's voice gave no hint of her emotions; it was as if she were reading her words from a book.

Rogue wondered how Ororo could really be that angry and hurt, and yet sound like she was discussing how to color Easter eggs. She almost opened her mouth to ask, but she remembered that promise, just before she got herself in trouble again.

"Look, let me go find him, and if Ah can bring him back, Ah want to try to fix things, allright? Ah know there's not much Ah can say, and Ah know it's gonna take some time, but can we agree to try?" Rogue bit the inside of her lip, hoping Ororo would bend a bit.

Ororo's gaze once more met Rogue's as she searched the redhead's eyes for sincerity. A small breeze rustled through the treetops as her face relaxed slightly, and just a hint of a smile teased the corners of her eyes. "Agreed," she replied. "Now, are you going to help me finish this, or not?"

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Purely out of reflex, Remy's head snapped around, focusing his attention, if not his eyes, on her face. He felt...what? If she really could see him, why hadn't he felt her shock at his appearance? Why had she not made that funny noise everyone else did when they saw him? He hadn't a clue what to say to her. While talking to her, he'd felt safe, anonymous. He'd felt...free. Now he felt threatened and scared, but by what he couldn't say. She was still Dakota. She hadn't changed the way she talked to him, she hadn't drawn back in disgust when he'd held her hand, she hadn't done anything to make him feel so insecure, so why was he feeling like this?

As the silence drew on, Dakota finally broke it. **What's the problem, wonderboy? Aren't I allowed to say you have a nice smile?**

There was a laugh in her voice as she assessed his reaction.

"Chere, you sayin' you been watchin' me de whole time we been talkin'?" Remy grew tense, almost trembling as he remembered how he'd let his guard down, had reacted to what she was telling him, and to what he had relayed to her. The thief in him was yelling "You stupid imbecile!" at the top of it's imaginary lungs. The heart and soul of him was hushed and undecided, waiting for ... acceptance? No, better not to name that. Hope only hurts when acknowledged. If you never feel it, it won't leave you feeling completely beaten when it was taken away.

Dakota ruefully acknowledged that she was going to have to calm him down all over again. **Well, no, I can't say that I've been watching you the whole time. Mostly when I thought you weren't looking. Those Roy Orbison shades of yours make it hard to tell exactly where you're looking. I'll admit I'm kind of surprised you haven't caught me at it. After a while, I was getting pretty obvious about it. After all, there's something about you that's well worth looking at.** And how! She told herself as she eyed the gorgeous fall of reddish brown hair, and let that voice of his trickle up her spine.

"Chere, you don' know? You been watchin' me all dis time, an' you still don' know?" Remy was figuratively rocked back on his heels. Dark glasses or no, he figured every last one of his handicaps would have been pathetically obvious. Was it possible that he wasn't quite as bad off as he'd thought? No, there was no way he could have imagined the reactions of everyone he'd passed on the street. Everyone who'd looked, shuddered, and turned away. He'd felt it. No, his Dakota was just being unusual, as usual.

What don't I know, Remy? You have something else to confess? Waitwaitwait, let me get into psychological therapy mode here. Okay, mein liebchen. Tell Dr. Dakota ze next problem ve haf to cure.

Remy fought a laugh. "How is it you can make me forget to be serious, petite?" A smile teased the corners of his mouth. "Should I call you Sigmund?" he asked.

Depends. How do you feel about your mother? Dakota's eyes twinkled as she looked across at him. God she loved him. But, as the ancients would classify it, filios. Brotherly love. Or they might have said ex animo, from the heart. What she felt when she looked at Remy defied description. They'd probably kill each other if they had to interact on a day to day basis for too long, but Remy defined friendship to her. She knew a heart could love many people. Love was elastic, and could stretch six ways from Sunday if it needed to. There were all kinds of love. For instance, one could love chocolate truffles with only slightly less intensity than a husband. One could love a spring day, but you could never wrap sunshine around you the way you could a smile. She knew she didn't love Remy as a lover would. There was a zero romance factor. Lust, yes. Romance, no. Ooh-la-la was there ever lust, though. A mental picture of herself drooling was enough to send her into a fit of the giggles. Thank God he hadn't caught that.

Remy quirked an eyebrow at her. "Somethin' funny, Doc?"

Um...no. {chuckle} not at all. She broke up again. **Ooooh! Ouch!

Dammit! Owowowow! Cajun, you make me laugh one more time, and I'll make sure you never do the horizontal hokeypokey again! OWWWW!** She did her best to make light of the fact that she was really hurting. He seemed awfully shaky to her, and he just might go off the deep end. Not that he was weak, she knew, it was more that he was extraordinarily fragile right now. Her knowing that was based on a lifetime of silent observation and having been in somewhat the same position herself.

Remy blinked, translated that, blinked again, and then started laughing so hard he fell out of his chair. "Damn but you got a way wit' words, chere!"

**Oh yeah? Damn but that hurt! ** she cut loose with a string of low level grumbling that left Remy in no doubt that everything right down to Kennedy's assassination was his fault.

"Um, petite?" Remy was stifling his amusement to the best of his ability, but unfortunately for him, right now that wasn't very effectively. Of course, Dakota noticed.

Another blue streak of cussing ripped through him. "Um...Dakota? You're not helpin', petite." Remy almost lost it again at a particularly inventive curse that in no uncertain terms told him to perform an anatomical impossibility.

He finally got a finger and toe-hold on his laughter. After sternly warning himself that she might commit physical violence if he didn't quit laughing at her, he tried again.

"Chere...non. Dakota, it don' feel like a problem no more. Don' feel like I worry 'bout nothin', not when I'm 'round you. T'ink I need to keep you 'round, permanent, jus' for dat." Best not to make a big deal about this, just spit it out. It wasn't worth agonizing about, not anymore. "I'm blind, chere."

The silence in the room rocked for a minute, as if his words had been ping-pong balls spoinging from wall to wall.

Izzat it? No more dark, depressing, ew-ick-yuck stuff to tell the Doctor? 'Cause I gotta tell you, Remy, I need to be unprofessional here for a sec.

"Dat's de last of it, chere. When you told me you'd been watchin' me, t'ought you knew dat I was blind. Isn't like I can hide it, much." Remy felt nothing but matter of fact as he told her that. No self-pity, no sadness, no regret, no 'I wish it were otherwise'. It simply was.

Good, she told him, and promptly burst into tears.

"What de matter, petite?" Remy stood, and hovered at the edge of the bed, unsure of what to do. He badly wanted to simply pick her up and cuddle her on his lap, but there were too many tubes, wires and machines in the way. And so he settled on the edge of the bed, and placed his clumsy but workable left hand on her shoulder in an awkward pat. "Please don' cry. Not 'bout me."

**About who, then? I don't know anyone who deserves my tears more, Remy. No, I don't mean that I'm sorry for you, but I hurt for you,

and I can't do a dang thing to make it better. I hate that.** She wound down to a few sniffles, and tried to wipe her nose with the back of her hand, but couldn't quite make her hand reach. **Gotta kleenex, Cajun?**

"Not on me, petite. Didn' know I be meetin' up wit' a damsel in distress, and you caught me jus' a li'l unprepared." He quickly ran his hands over her bedside table, and discovered the standard issue box he'd been hoping for. "But, bein' de resourceful fellow dat I am, I foun' one anyways." He said, "Can you do dis, petite?"

Sorry but I can't make my hands move quite that far. Guess you get to play mom. She half smiled at the thought of him being anything even remotely approaching maternal.

"I give it a shot, petite, but I don' do so good on de small actions." He acutely wanted to be of some comfort, but he was scared he would knock her in her eye, or something. "Tell you what. Does it hurt if I move your hand for you?" He lifted her arm an inch or so, and waited for her evaluation.

She appraised her condition on a pain scale of one to ten. It stuck at about a 6 or so, with occassional flares of three hundred and twelve. **I can live with that,** she told him. But not for long, she silently added.

"Den I let you do de mop up, but I get your hand dere for you, deal?" He got hit anew with how serious her condition was, and how much pain she must be in. He refused to think about what the next few hours might bring.

Deal.

After a couple of swipes with the tissue, Dakota managed to ask a question that had been nibbling at her since she first opened her eyes. **Remy?**

"Yeah, chere?" He'd settled back in his chair, and was doing his best to not think too much about anything at that particular moment.

Do they hurt?

"What, my eyes? Non. I get headaches, sometimes, but non, de eyes don' hurt nomore. Accident happen' 'bout a year ago." His voice was matter-of-fact, with no particular sign of stress or strain when he mentioned the accident.

That wasn't what she'd been going to ask, but it would have answered her next question. **And the scars?**

At that question, he visibly tensed. The blindness was â€| tolerable. The scars the world saw were the scars of his soul being worn on the outside instead of inside. He couldn't hide any longer. His invisible wounds had become public knowledge. He should have known sooner or later she'd ask, but he'd forgotten for a while. For another small moment out of time, he'd beenâ€|normal. He'd almost been the old Gambit, living in the moment, and not worrying about the future. "Yeah, sometimes dey hurt." His voice was clipped, really not wanting to go there.

I really wasn't trying to upset you there, wonderboy. I just wondered. I know what it's like living with pain, and I know it can be tough. Isn't there anything they can do? Her eyes roved over his face with compassion.

The question didn't do anything whatsoever to relax him. If possible, he grew even more strained. But, he answered. "Not 'bout de face, Dakota. Stuck wit dat. De Doc's talkin' 'bout some surgery on de hands, though." He drew in a deep breath and let it go slowly. "Not sure I can do dat."

Dakota eyed him carefully. He was wound up in knots from a couple of emotionally charged questions. Questions that he'd probably be hearing a lot once he left his hideaway. And she'd make sure he'd leave it. He needed to become strong again. Right now, he was hurt and hiding, whether he admitted it or not. She suspected that he knew it; he wasn't the kind to deliberately lie to himself. So, how to help him deal with this? She was under no illusions. Her time was running out and she could feel it. The feeble amount of strength she'd managed to hang on too was slipping away, bit by bit. Remy wasn't ready to let her go, though. And until he was, she wasn't going to give in to the darkness she could feel edging up on her.

Remy?

"Yeah?" His voice was blunt, waiting for the next arrows in the dark.

Would you come here for a minute? Dakota's mind gave him no clues, but he stood, and once again perched on the edge of her bed.
Lean over.

He gracefully complied with her request, although not understanding it. Making a herculean effort that she knew she was going to have to pay dearly for, she struggled to lift her hand to his face.

He "saw" the hand coming, but made no effort to flinch away. This was Dakota, and if she wanted to find out just what a topographical map felt like, so be it. But he couldn't help her to do it. He just hoped his shields would hold. There was no way she could touch him, and not make him even more aware of the ruin his face had become. He couldn't quite force himself to believe she didn't mind how he looked. He sat braced and vibrating with uneasiness.

Slowly, she ran the backs of her fingers over his scarred and twisted face. It was almost like she was petting him, soothing him with her hands. With a feathery light index finger, she began stroking each individual scar one by one, working her way over his face. And then she began again.

On the third repetition, some of his tension had seeped away, and he regained a measure of control. "What're you doin', petite?"

Unhurting you. With those simple and evocative words, a wall in Remy gave way. He was awed and humbled that he'd so underestimated her. He caught her hand, and held it to his cheek. Another deep breath, and he felt some of his mental pain utterly disappear. In some unknown way, she truly had "unhurted" him.

"Chere, you're a gift." He pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. "T'ank you don' seem like much to say. Don' seem to be good wit' words, no more. Before, words don' mean much. Now, dey mean everyt'ing. I don' know how to tell you so you believe me when I say you did unhurt me." Remy struggled to find the words to tell her that once again, she'd opened a locked door for him. All his skill as a thief, and there were still locks in his mind that he couldn't or wouldn't open for himself. She'd shown him there was nothing in that one particular dark closet but old ghosts who'd lost their power to torment his dreams. He felt hope again. No, not again. This was the first time he'd ever allowed himself to feel it, and accept that it was not going to leave him crushed and bleeding from a different kind of scar when it left. For the first time, he knew that hope brought with it peace.

Never in his life had he been comforted after a nightmare, and the luxury of it flooded his senses. He felt his chest tighten, and the back of his throat start to close as it started to become too much for him. His breathing became strained, as he struggled against the ache in his chest. He silently battled for control, and Dakota watched him combat his emotions, knowing he needed the release like no other man she'd ever met.

Let it go, baby. Don't keep all that garbage inside you. Hasn't anyone ever been good to you? The last was said with a sad incredulity, knowing that such was exactly the case. She weakly put her hand behind his neck and tugged. **Commere,** she said as she pulled his head down to her shoulder. Her price for offering comfort was to watch her vision dim, but she fought to keep her thoughts calm, knowing that she needed to for his sake. **Let it go, Remy. I know talking about all of that mess won't help. Trust me, I've had so much therapy, I could tell the plumber my past and not have it mean a thing. It's having another moment, another memory to replace it, and I know you'll find one.**

His shoulders began to heave, but still he fought releasing all that ugliness where Dakota could see. The conflict she was watching broke her heart. She needed to add one more straw. With every last scrap of strength she possessed, she drew her other arm around him, and pulled his head to her chest in a faint hug. **Let it go, Remy. Let it go. I'm here for you. It's okay, you're safe here.**

That did it. Right then, it all came crashing down around him. The walls that looked like concrete from the outside, and woven straw from the inside crumbled into dust. The faded remnants of his control kept the storm away from Dakota, but anyone else in the room would have been assaulted with a lifetime's worth of pain, unhappiness, and hatred of self. Through it all, Dakota held him. Providing him with an unstinting measure of compassion and undemanding comfort.

Just a few miles away, Chat woke from his nap, sat up and whined in sympathy, his emerald green eyes filled with a human gentleness and sadness.

Hundreds of miles away, Rogue began quietly crying in her sleep.

Just a few doors from Rogue, Jean once again fell out of bed. This time, there was no mistaking what had woken her. Abruptly waking

Scott and quickly briefing him, she headed for the Control Room and Cerebro, with Scott following right on her heels. An astute observer would see an odd mixture of impatience and nervousness in his steps, although his face remained impassive.

Dakota knew she didn't have much time left. She had to know Remy was going to be all right, but she was racing the clock for every minute. It was getting harder to breath. All of a sudden it was lots harder. She tried to relax by slowly closing her eyes, and opening them just as slowly. Nothing. She blinked, and saw nothing but blackness. She blinked again, and tried to look at Remy, but saw only darkness. She felt a stab of panic, and unfortunately, Remy caught it.

"Chere? Non! Non, chere, not now!" Remy had no shields remaining, and once he focused on her, he knew there was no question that Dakota had little time left. He'd known this would happen. He'd been happy for a day, and this was the price he'd have to pay for it. He knew he wasn't going to be allowed to keep her. NON! No more! It was all going to end here. There was no way he was going to lose yet another friend. This time it would end. He ignored all the paraphenalia that was in his way, and clutched her to him. Her cheek was soft against his. Soft as Chat's fur. That there was someone else depending on him was the tiniest of islands in his ocean of misery, but it was a focus. It was somewhere to cling as the waves got higher and higher.

Shhh, Remy. It's all right, really it is. Don't worry so. her mental voice was growing weaker.

"Dakota, non! Don' give up on me, petite. You're gonna be okay. You'll see, you're gonna be fine. Don' go!" Remy was in a full-blown panic. There was absolutely no way he could handle this right now. He'd been swinging on an emotional pendulum for the past 48 hours, and he'd been on the high end not fifteen minutes ago. He was headed for the return swing on a crash course.

**You'll be â€|fineâ€|Remy. Weâ€|both knew I â€|wouldn'â€|be thereâ€|for youâ€|butâ€|you'll beâ€|. jus' fine. Her thoughts were fading in and out, causing the edges of her words to blur and bleed together.. Did Remy just say something? His voice sounded at a distance, desperately trying to pull her back to him.

She knew God had given her Remy and let her know what it was like to have a heart-friend before she had to go. It was a precious gift. She would always be his friend. She needed to tell him not to be so unhappy. She wasn't going away forever. She'd always be with him. She needed to tell him that. The indominatable will that had seen her through so much was faltering. Just once more, she pleaded with her heart. One more time, please give me the strength to do this right.

"Remyâ€|" So faint. Did he hear it? Please let him have heard it. "Remyâ€|" Just a little stronger. Was it enough? It was so much easier than it should have been to form the first words she'd spoken in decades, but she was so weak. She strained and fought for time. That's all; just a little time.

"Dakota? I heard you, petite. I heard you." The husky voice was lodging in his heart, a memory to keep. But he knew the effort she was making. "Don' talk, please? You need to be quiet, get your

streng't back. Den we talk all day long, neh?" He didn't believe himself. Who was he trying to convince? He held her just a little tighter, knowing he couldn't stop what was happening right in front of him. As Dakota herself had told him, sometimes even God has to bow to the rules.

"Don'tâ€|make meâ€|feelâ€|sorryâ€|for you. Don' â€|quitâ€|caring â€|'boutâ€|people." He was holding his breath, fearing that no matter how small the noise, it would cover one of her soft, almost soundless words. She fell silent for a minute.

A collage of impressions from the past several hours ran over him. Dark notes of pain, bright spots of laughter. And as he continued to remember, the bright spots slowly began to outshine the dark. There began his acceptance. He drew in a deep breath of air, and released his fear. It was a selfish fear, he now knew. Fear for himself, not for her. His heart still hurt, but the tight ball of confusion and pain in him was softly dissolving. He let himself feel the comfort of simply holding her, and it helped. "Dakota, you de best frien' I ever had. An' I won' let dat go." He felt the barest ghost of a smile begin. "I'm good at rememberin' t'ings. I always remember you." The panic was gone. He couldn't affect the situation, so he told himself to let it go. **Guess you gonna have to deal wit' life as it hits you, homme.** It was time.

He gently laid her back onto the bed, smoothing his disfigured hand over her face, learning for the first time by touch what he would never see. He felt the moisture of her tears, and his heart echoed them. "S'okay, Dakota. You've made it okay. Chere, you got a corner of my soul forever."

Her hand lay weakly on top of his. "Beâ€|goodâ€|. Cajun. Orâ€|I'llâ€|hauntâ€|youâ€|for...evâ€|" Like that, she was gone.

If only you would, Dakota. If only you would. He offered up a silent prayer, asking God to make her a special angel. He pressed a last kiss to her forehead, and at that moment, he finally believed his life might someday be okay.

Even as Jean worked with Cerebro to trace Remy's "signature", question upon question raced through her mind, demanding multiple fractions of her attention. Why was she alone in receiving Gambit's lapses in control? Why had he released that incredible psi-storm she'd been witness to? Why, why, why? All the why's of the world, and no answers.

This time, however, she had found a path to follow, and it led to Canada. *Why on earth would he have picked Canada?* As the echoes of Gambit's emotional explosion faded, she struggled to narrow it further, before he could vanish again. Finally, as the last echoes dissolved into the vastness of the astral plane, she achieved victory.

She'd found him. Now remained the question of what to do about it? He'd made it clear that he wished no contact with the X-Men, but she was worried about him. Scott stood right beside her, focused on every atom in Cerebro's display panel, sharing her desire to find Gambit, and practically vibrating with the desire to atone for their damaging misinterpretation of past events.

As well, Gambit himself was operating under several incorrect assumptions. He didn't understand that every single member of the team wanted him back. He had no idea that Rogue was driving herself with an intensity never before displayed, rewriting herself in an effort to ask his forgiveness for her weakness, and her failure to be what she should have been. There were sure to be lapses, but her obstinacy was legendary, and she'd focused on a goal she had no intention of being swayed from. Not for Remy, but because of him. All this and more, he needed to know.

Well, she'd answered her own question of what to do about finding him. They were going to have to talk to him, and they were going to have to do it soon.

She turned to Scott, knowing he'd find a way to make it happen. He was the team's leader, and as much as they poked fun at him for it, there was no one better suited to fill the position. His reserve with others somehow made you feel that your secrets would always be safe with him, and his open command of any situation assured you that there was a goal that could be completed with some action on your part.

The X-Men were adults who were more than capable of thinking for themselves, and for all that they teased and tormented each other like rival siblings, they knew the tremendous strength of will it took to outline a plan of attack in a hopeless situation. They knew that his clear thinking and ability to put "hopeless" aside were the very points that had made him a leader in the first place. What kept Cyclops as leader, was the fact that his plans worked, hopeless situation or not.

And now, he had to find a way to bring back Remy. Or not.

**

Rogue knew she was dreaming, but she didn't want to wake up. She'd been dreaming about Remy, and she snuggled the feeling of him into her heart. If dreaming of him was the closest she could get, she'd hang on to the dreams with a death grip.

He seemed so sad, in this dream. So incredibly, awfully sad. She could see the blue swirl of tears intertwined with the muddy brown of unhappiness. Tears escaped from under her closed lids in empathic sympathy. The distinctive dusty cinnamon color she would forever associate with Remy permeated her senses. Her sleeping mind tried to merge color with memory, attempting to impose Remy's face over her dream, but the dream refused to comply.

She could see him, sort of, in the way you always saw a familiar person. You didn't see them, you saw the sense of them, the personality. Which is so often why you don't notice a friend's new outfit, or that their hair is suddenly six shades darker. You cease registering their physical characteristics, and they become a feeling, an evocative name. When someone said "Logan", she didn't think "Short, stocky, kind of fuzzy, mean looking guy", she thought "difficult, grouchy, sarcastic, friend." He wasn't a compilation of physical characteristics, no one was. When someone said "Remy", she was attacked by multiple emotions, each competing for the right to be recognized first. It took a moment to remember to attach a face to

the memories. Often, she simply allowed herself to feel all he was to her, without holding his picture before her eyes. It wasn't necessary.

His sadness was still growing. Why was he so sad? How could she help make him feel better? *Please come home, Remy.* It was a wish from a wide-open heart. *I'm so sorry. Please come home.* Even dreaming, she knew the illogic of her simply wishing him home. Wasn't going to happen. He must have zero desire to see any one of them again, after the way they'd forced him to leave. So what if it wasn't entirely their fault. It had taken Jean erasing Remy's accidental manipulations for them to admit they'd done something extremely harmful to him. She felt angry with them that they'd not been willing to believe in him with unconditional trust. And then she reminded herself again that she was no better. She'd done much worse; had verbally attacked him with venomous accuracy. The others had merely reflected what they'd received. She, on her own initiative, had driven him away, and she'd done it all by herself.

So, who was more wrong?

**

Calmly and silently, Remy had completed the arrangements for Dakota. In lieu of any relatives who'd mattered, he'd taken control of her hospital bills, and other arrangements. The hospital hadn't asked questions, and he hadn't volunteered information. He'd arranged for her to be buried in a simple plot nearby. One last task had made possible a small marble and granite statue of an angel, with an inscription at the bottom that read:

DAKOTA

Beloved Friend

May her gifts be rewarded

Even though her hospital identification had provided them, he added no other names, nor dates. Somehow, they seemed unnecessary.

Weeks later, he and Chat visited the gravesite. Standing there, feeling closer to her, somehow, he told Dakota about how he missed her, and how he wished he could hear her telling him to keep caring about people. He told her of his struggles every day, and how frightened he was, facing the surgery Doctor Harrigan had planned. About how dispirited he sometimes got, and how thinking about her made him smile, although it still made his heart ache.

He sat cross-legged at the side of her grave, and held Chat close as he continued. Telling her of all that had happened in the last two weeks.

He told her that he'd received a letter from the X-Men, and how they'd figured out what had happened. He bowed his head, and told her how confused he was, how he didn't know what to do. He didn't know if he could go back. He wasn't the same person, and he didn't want to be that person anymore. He'd shed all his masks with the fire, and the thought of putting them back on left him uncertain and uneasy. He wanted more for himself this time, but what was more? He stopped short of asking her what to do. He knew she'd have told him in no

uncertain terms to figure it out for himself.

Feeling somewhat better after spending an hour talking to her, he smoothly rose to his feet, and turned to go, having never uttered a word.

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Remy sat at the kitchen table, where the letter from the X-Men sat in silent accusation, as it had for months. His fingers danced around the edges of it, never quite touching, as if he could deny the reality of it. Instead, his fingers strayed over to the small tape recorder sitting next to it, and for perhaps the thousandth time, pressed play.

The voice was that of a stranger, reciting the letter he'd had forwarded to her with the rest of his mail. Again he listened to the tape gone scratchy from constant use, and yet his troubled thoughts grew no clearer.

Chat sat at his knee, leaning against him in that universal way dogs have of offering silent understanding. Remy allowed the comfort to flow through him. He always felt better knowing Chat was there. He'd grown by leaps and bounds since that day some months ago, when he'd been a scared, shivering scrap of fur who looked at Remy as if to say, "I choose you."

Now, he stood almost to Remy's knees, and showed no signs of stopping. Remy felt like the pup had saved his sanity after Dakota died. He'd been someone to focus on, someone to understand, someone to be there when he cried. In return, Remy lavished all the affection he'd stored inside for years on the puppy.

Remy dropped his hand onto Chat's head, and gave his ears an affectionate rub. Silently, as he seemed to do most things these days, he slowly stood, and made his way to the door. Opening it, he headed out into the early evening, holding the door for Chat to follow.

Their evening walk led, as so many of them frequently did, to Dakota. It was where Remy often found himself when he needed to talk.

Remy had learned from Dakota that no matter what he looked like, he had consequence. He had meant something to Dakota, and that made him more special than anyone else on earth for a little piece of time. No matter what his past told him, now he had value. There was no more need to court death in an effort to atone for past mistakes. He'd carry the shame of his past to the grave, but he couldn't try to make the past right. The past was just that, and could never be changed. What mattered was now.

As he sat near her, Remy thought about his current quasi-life. *It's not enough any more*, he thought to himself. He felt Chat settle at his side, and absently stroked his ears. The preoccupied petting soothed him, and allowed for clearer thinking. He wanted more than this non-existence.

He'd put off answering the X-Men for months. Why, he wasn't exactly certain. His emotional scars were healing, but still sensitive. Could he go back looking like he did? The people in town still shied away,

but it no longer mattered, much. They were strangers. Control of his empathy had returned, and with it had come a measure of serenity. He would be risking that hard won calm should the X-Men turn away, too.

Pointless, homme. You got not'ing de X-Men want, or need. They'd explained in the letter about how sorry they were, and how they wanted him back. But that was only because they didn't know, and he didn't know how to tell them, or even if he wanted to.

One t'ing at a time, homme. Jus' do de surgery, and see where you stan' after dat. No more decisions till den. And then, fingers buried in Chat's fur, he realized he had one more decision to make. *What am I gonna do wit' you, pup?* His heart clouded in worry.

He understood full well what the doctors had outlined for him. Four successive surgeries, with months of physical therapy after that. He'd be in the hospital for about 4 months, and there was no way he could care for Chat.

His fingers stilled their movements as he thought. Chat grew impatient with Remy's preoccupation, and nudged his nose against his cheek, urging him to continue. Remy sighed, and twisted to pick the growing puppy up, and held him across his lap, feeling again the heart-ease that came with the simple showing of affection.

Remy knew what he had to do, much as his emotions rebelled against it. *Gotta find you a home, pup. More of a home dan you got wit' a broke-down mutant. You need a fam'ly. T'ink maybe I know jus' where to fin' you one. Dey're not my fam'ly no more, but dey can be yours. Den I be like an in-law, maybe. Closest I t'ink I ever gonna get again.* He bent to rub his cheek against the softness of the young dog's fur. His turbulent thoughts grew calmer, letting Chat once again soothe him. *T'ink it's de right t'ing to do, Chat. I need to be me again, an' it's gonna take me goin' away for a while to do dat. 'Sides, if I know Stormy an' Ro-â€|well, you gonna be spoiled rotten in no time.*

He still violently shied away from thoughts of Rogue. It was one of the things in his life he had no idea what to do with. He knew he couldn't run from his feelings for Rogue forever, but he wasn't yet ready to open that overful closet.

He made himself relax, and carefully traced a hand over Dakota's name on the headstone. *I'm finally headed in de right direction, chere. Wit' you're help, gonna get t'rough dis. Won' be back for a while, but I'll be t'inkin' bout you all de time. Don' tease de cherubs too much, eh?*

He placed Chat back on the ground, and as he stood by the gravesite, a small summer breeze teased the ends of his hair, and quickly kissed his cheek. Remy smiled, and in his husky voice said "Love you too, chere."

**

Rogue strode impatiently up and down the hall. Controlling her temper resulted in a couple of unfortunate side effects, one of which was constant motion. Finally spotting Cyclops leaving the study, she pounced.

"Three months! For three dang months Ah let you tell me not yet, not now, soon, we'll talk about it, and all the other kinds of garbage Ah let you hand me, mostly 'cause Ah knew you were right, but Ah can't take it no more, Scott! Ah know you keep sayin' Remy's got to make the first move, but Ah need to know he's all right. Please can Ah just go check? Ah promise Ah won't talk to him, and Ah won't let him see me, but Ah just got to know!" For a moment, it sounded like the old Rogue demanding her own way in sheer defiance of what should be done, and she replayed her outburst in her head, wondering if she needed to apologize for jumping all over Scott when he least expected it. No, not this time, she knew. Her outburst was prompted by honest concern, and she also knew that despite her bluster, she'd abide by whatever he decided.

Scott gazed thoughtfully at the rose tinted Rogue standing before him, all but vibrating with nervous energy. Hiding a smile, he was surprised she'd lasted the past few months without wearing holes in portions of the mansion floor. His amusement faded quickly though, for he was as concerned as she.

"Noah," he began, he paused, considering the impact of what he was about to say, and decided that although it would hurt, it was the truth, and she'd understand. "Noah, I don't think he wants any of us near him, right now." *Especially you,* he added silently.

"But he might be hurt, or maybe he didn't believe us when you wrote the letter and told him how we all were real sorry, and wanted him to come back!" Rogue didn't want to agree, but she was unwillingly aware she was fighting a losing battle.

"Noah, you know as well as I that Jean's been keeping tabs on the "chimera" Remy who occassionaly makes an appearance here. Jean feels that due to the reduced frequency of his visits, and the way his astral image has calmed recently, he's doing fine. I know you're concerned, and believe me, I share it, but I won't allow you to disturb whatever peace he's made for himself. With his empathy, I'm not convinced he wouldn't feel your presence nearby, even if he never saw you." Scott hated the way he felt after forcing her to confront facts, but how he felt was the most unimportant thing in the world right now.

He studied Rogue, and saw the worry in her eyes, and how desperation was driving her. Softly, he sighed, and weighed the team's almost frantic concern against the necessity of allowing Remy to make the decision to return. The only apology they could make to Remy right now was to allow him to choose. So far, the choice he'd made was fairly obvious.

As time had gone by, though, each member of the team grew more and more upset with themselves, and the longer time went by with no answer from Remy, the worse it got. Every last one of them was, bluntly, moping, and something needed to be done.

"All right." Scott blew a larger sigh, and ran his over the back of his neck in resignation. "All right. I'll send someone to check on him. But not you!" He added quickly as he saw her twitch towards the door.

Rogue smiled and all but bounced up and down. "Thanks, sugah!" she

said, and no longer able to keep still, bolted for the nearest window, heading for the sky.

**

Remy stood at the gate at the end of the road, looking at his former home. He'd done nothing but think on the long flight here, and while he was sure that this was the best thing for all concerned, he didn't much like it. One hand firmly rested on Chat, and he again reminded himself that this was what needed to be done.

He knelt, and took Chat's muzzle in his hand. "I know you be good, so I don' need to tell you dat. I know dey gonna love you, so I don' need to worry bout dat, neither. But I wan' you to be special good to someone else for me, neh? Her name be Rogue. She don' like me no more, but she needs somebody. She don' know you were wit' me, so dis give you a good chance to be her somebody. An' dis way, I can know you're takin' care of her de way I wanted to. She couldn't never touch me, an' I've learned dat touch is a valuable t'ing. So maybe she touch you, an' it be almost like it was me." Remy stopped, unable to continue. He pulled Chat to him in a clumsy, one-armed hug. Standing, he rang the bell, and swiftly turned back to the cab waiting just around the bend.

**

Rogue flew lazy circles in the sky, her unexpected success with Cyclops leaving her feeling giddy and weightless. Turning on her back, she floated, daydreaming and looking at the clouds, letting her mind conjure them into fantastical shapes and images.

She heard the faint ring of the gate bell, and rolled over in time to see a cab pulling away, and a small figure waiting at the gate. Curiosity pulled her from the sky to see a young puppy sitting there, watching her with a gaze that could only be described as considering.

The first thing she noticed about him were the emerald green eyes, a color that mirrored her own. The second thing was the color of his coat. It was the exact shade of dusty cinnamon she held akin to Remy. The expected longing and sadness swept through her, and was set aside for the moment.

She landed several feet away, and knelt to his level. "Well, where'd you come from, sugah? Looks like somebody done left you here." She watched as his head tilted, first one way, then the other. His gaze never wavered from hers, and slowly, as if his decision had been made, his tail wagged. Once, twice. "Well, guess Ah pass, then." She was unexpectedly charmed by the dog. She'd never had a pet, before. "If you got left here, you must be for us, then. Let's get you inside to meet your new family." At the word "family" he stood, and looked toward the mansion. "Yup. That's where they are, all right. You're a smart dog, ya know that?" Rogue opened the gate, and the dog followed at her side.

Entering the front door, she stood just inside the entry way, and hollered for the X-Men at top volume. "VISITOR!"

They scrambled from every floor, floating, jumping, or, the sensible ones, simply walking down the stairs.

"That's the visitor?" Jean questioned, humor lighting her face.

"That runt?" this from Logan.

"Who donated the furball?" from Bobby.

"New student, perhaps?" Beast.

"Does he have a license on that collar?" Who else but Cyclops.

"What beautiful eyes." Understandably, Storm.

"Mine." Definite, non-negotiable, Rogue.

Suddenly, Logan stilled, sniffing the air. He looked at the dog with a piercing gaze, and advanced.

Chat narrowed his eyes, looking back at Logan.

Logan stopped and thought briefly, flashing a look at Rogue, who was still focused on the dog. He looked at Cyclops, who had noticed Wolverine's sudden stillness, and was waiting. Wolverine jerked his head in the direction of the study, and the two quietly closed the door.

"That there dog's from the Cajun. Must'a been here not twenty minutes ago, scent's still fresh. You want I should go after him?"

"No." Cyclops' response was immediate. "No, if he wanted us to know he was here, he'd have left a note with the dog. Don't tell the rest of the team yet. Let me think about this for a while, all right?"

"Sure. Just thought you oughtta know." Logan turned, and left Scott alone with his thoughts.

Meanwhile, Rogue had sat down on the floor of the hall, and was petting the young dog. She felt like something that had been missing from her for a long time was falling into place. She looked at the puppy's collar. *Chat?* She wondered who in their right mind named a dog after a conversation. "Chat?" She said aloud. Immediately, the dog turned to look at her. "Well, guess ya know your name, even if it is an odd one. Think ya wanna be mah dog?" The puppy yipped, and licked her cheek.

Rogue laughed and hugged the young dog.

Once again, Remy found himself standing in front of the mirror in his entryway. Slowly lifting his hand, he spread it flat on the cool surface of the mirror. **All my life I been a reflection. I look in someones eyes, an' I see myself. I look in a mirror, an' I see myself. Always in two-dimensions. Now I can' see de reflections no more, so who am I? What you got left to give to de world, homme?** There was no self-pity in the question, just an honest question.

Remy wondered when he'd lost his emotions. Did it begin with Sinister? Or when Rogue had turned away? Or was it overload from

watching Dakota die? Maybe it was his willingly giving away his last friend. He didn't know. All he did know was that he felt hollow. Dakota had told him not to quit caring about people. But who were people?

He'd looked into Storm's eyes, and seen a reflection of a hero. So he'd become one. He'd looked into Rogue's eyes, and seenâ€¦his future. He thought he'd had a shot at making that future possible. Dieu, how he hated the future. That reflection had shattered into a million pieces. There would be no reconstructing it. The shards had cut to ribbons all the reflections he'd been. **Who are you, homme?**

His hand shifted to the edge of the mirror, and he lifted it down from the wall. **I won' be a reflection for anybody, not ever again.**

So, how do you go about becoming real? You can't make yourself real, as the Velveteen Rabbit knew all too well. Someone had to do it for you. **But if you can' make yourself real, how you ever gonna be more dan a reflection?**

Find what defines you. That's what Dakota would say. **You are a real person, you just need to believe it.** Belief. He considered the concept with a detachment he wished he could have found years ago.

What defines Remy LeBeau? he asked himself.

Pride. He knew that ninety percent of all his actions stemmed from pride. Not letting others see his hurts, staying away from the X-Men, even consenting to the surgeries he'd recently scheduled to be undergone. **Is dat all I got left?**

Love. No. Love had made him vulnerable in ways he could never allow again. There would be no love defining himself. He'd tolerate liking, he might allow himself worry about someone, it's possible he'd even care in some small way, but in no way would he leave himself so open to destruction again.

Dakota would tell him to keep trying. To connect to people would make the effort worth it, but to him it was like learning not to touch a hot stove. At some point, multiple attempts were no longer hopeful, they were stupid. Remy was not going to be a stupid person.

What do I wan' to be? An X-Man. The answer came from out of the blue, and so quickly he knew it had been lurking, waiting for a chance to surge to the forefront. And this after he'd just finished telling himself he didn't want to be a stupid person.

And there were so many valid reasons it simply wasn't possible. He was blind. Although the surgery would possibly give him back the use of his hands, his dexterity would be gone. And last, and most importantly, there was no way on Le Bon Dieu's earth he'd allow himself within fifty miles of Rogue again. **Who don' you trust, homme? Yourself, or her?** A question whispered from the back of his mind, that he firmly refused to answer.

Okay, that was enough of that. Again, what did he want to be? **Rogue's.** Another too quick answer. He told himself that it was

only habit. There was no way he'd be so incredibly asinine as to go down that road again.

He'd been watching the world go by for years. It was what he did best, it seemed. And hadn't Bishop told him that was who he was? The Witness. **How appropos.** Remy was amused at the irony. A blind Witness? How delightfully poetic. After all, even Justice is blind.

So, is that all that was left for him to be? More to the point, is The Witness who he wanted to be? **Well, why not? I can always change who I decide to be, neh? It's my choice. I decide what I will or won' do. Nobody gonna make me t'ink followin' what dey wan' me to do is gonna get me somethin'. Not again.**

So. You t'ink you can be someone new jus' like dat. D'accord. Now, if dis is what you gonna do, best figure out how.

Say goodbye to de past. There was no way he could be someone new if he allowed memories to stay. The memories belong to the old person, not the new.

Say goodbye to Remy LeBeau. Something in his mind stirred at that, but he refused to listen. The stirring refused to quiet. It generated disturbance until he was forced to think it through. Why did it bother him to become someone new? It's what he wanted to be. A definite twinge there.

His resolve faltered briefly. **Am I lyin' to myself?** No. If he was lying to himself, he'd be wide open to everything. There were too many emotions in his past. Now he was content. He didn't feel anything. His shields protected him from the feelings of others, the emotions of the world had finally left him alone, and he liked it. No more emotional buffeting, no more uncertainties, no more being weak. Being alone was a good thing. It was trying to be part of a group that had caused all his problems in the past. This time he'd do it right.

Solitary. That would be his new name. No more Gambit, no more Remy LeBeau, and especially no more memories.

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Remy jacknifed into a sitting position, jerked awake from a sound sleep. His heart heartbeat thundered in his ears, sweat poured from him, and he couldn't stop shivering. **Damn dreams!** he thought, rolling his shoulders as if to shrug the nightmare off. Would they never cease?

This one had been a killer. He'd dreamed that he was watching Logan and Iceman square off in the Danger Room, when suddenly, he'd been Logan. He'd felt what Wolverine had felt, but not from the standpoint of a third party. He'd become Wolverine. Remy LeBeau, Gambit, and Solitary had all ceased to exist for those moments. From there the dream got worse.

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Wolverine had picked up a chunk of rock to throw, intending to distract Iceman into looking toward the noise while he came at him

from behind. He hesitated, thinking. Something about this situation was bothering him, and the more he worried at it, the worse the nagging became. Something was wrong. He eased back into the shadows, and thoughtfully went over the controlling factors. It was a simple Danger Room training session. Bobby was easy enough for Wolverine to neutralize, but his orders were to give the kid a remedial lesson in Sneak 101. Unseen, unfelt, the hand holding the rock began to glow.

**

It was the pain after the explosion that had rocketed Remy into wakefulness. He'd felt the agony of burning skin, smelled the stench that accompanied it, had his lungs seared by superheated air. Another violent shudder raced its way through him. **Shake it off, homme. Was a dream, dat's all. Jus' a dream.**

After one of those dreams he knew there was unequivocally zero possibility of returning to sleep. He rose, and dressed in one of his familiar sweat suits. As remnants of the nightmare subsided, he realized the cabin was cold enough to make him shiver without the aid of fear. Grabbing a quilt from the closet, he wandered out to the porch where he curled up and contemplated the sunrise he couldn't see.

Keep tellin' myself it's time to go do somet'ing, but I keep runnin' in place. Enough of dat. You've hit de end of de road, homme. Time to make all de decisions you said you'd make tomorrow. What's it gonna be, M'sieu Solitary?

Again and again he'd asked himself what he wanted. Again and again he'd rejected the involuntary answer. But not this time.

He remembered the weight that had fallen off his soul when Dakota had shattered the mirror of the past. He didn't have to earn the right to go home. Nor did he have to earn Rogue's respect and trust. Either they would welcome him or not. Either Rogue loved him or not. There was no middle ground to be found.

Did he want Rogue's love? Ahâ€|there was the middle ground he didn't find elsewhere. He couldn't be the Remy LeBeau who'd started out with a heart full of hope. He was Solitary now. He couldn't make decisions he couldn't live with.

The questions he was asking himself showed the fundamental changes he'd undergone in the past months. He no longer questioned his right to human understanding and compassion.

Ever'body got free will, homme. De choices you make from here on out have consequences, but de choices others gonna make have consequences, too. Dat's why bad t'ings sometimes happen to good people, like Dakota dyin' 'cause of a drunk driver. And maybe dat's how sometimes good t'ings happen to bad people, like l'il Stormy wanderin' into my shadows.

So, dis be my choice. I want to go home. But could he? Home meant Rogue. And as to his other question, maybe he should turn it around.

Do I love Rogue? He knew his anger at Rogue stemmed in part from

his frustration with himself and his limitations. His head knew she had nothing to do with his accident, but some awful part of him knew that because he'd been thinking of her instead of watching what was going on around him, she was the cause of his difficulties.

Do I love Rogue? There was no question she'd hurt him deliberately, and without care for the consequences of her actions. He'd reached out for her, and she'd flayed his emotions with the skill of a professional.

Do I love Rogue? She hadn't come looking for him, not that he really expected her too. The letter from the team had said they were all sorry for what had happened when he left, but did that include Rogue? He'd never once known her to apologize. That stiff necked pride of hers wouldn't allow her to admit she was wrong.

Do I love Rogue? He couldn't touch her. Not even in her heart, where it counted. She'd kept miles between them, even sitting a mere foot apart on the couch. That wasn't going to change until she did, which would probably be about the 12th of Never.

Do I love Rogue? The 64 million dollar question. **I'm angry with her!** But that was not an answer. **She hurt me!** That also was accurate, but still not an answer. **She doesn't want me!** Answer the damn question! Do you love her? **YES!**

And so, he had his answers. Now, the decisions would be easier to make but no less costly. He sat for hours, feeling the sun creep higher. He thought of his past, his time with the X-Men, Rogue, the accident. And he grew intensely introspective while thinking about Chat and Dakota. Time went by unnoticed, until the cooling temperatures of evening once again made him shiver.

His mind felt like it had been turned inside out, but finally it was decided. He rose, heading inside to gather what few things he couldn't walk away from. All in all, those items totalled less than a handful, including only Chat's rubber ball, and his memories.

End
file.